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**Bourdieu and conscious deliberation** [submitted version]**Geoffrey Mead***European Journal of Social Theory***Abstract**

Social theorists have in recent years concerned themselves with the question of the kind and intensity of people's everyday reflective capacities. In this respect, Bourdieu's theory has mostly been found wanting. In an effort to counter this sentiment, I intend to find in Bourdieu's theory of practice an adequate response to this question. This is accomplished first by examining the dominant 'mechanistic' interpretation of Bourdieu's theory, within which practice is reduced to programmatic action detached from conscious thought. While recognizing that mechanistic traces persist within Bourdieu's theory, I advocate an alternate reading that accentuates his manifestly 'anti-mechanistic' intentions. I argue that by reifying 'consciousness', opposing it to a mechanistic habitus, and then positing a triangular relation to a reified social world, commentators have manufactured theoretical problems that a different way of reading Bourdieu dissolves. In this alternate reading, the sociologist makes no wager on the causal efficacy of consciousness or habit, and allows for a conception of the relation between actor and world that locates 'agency' in improvised struggles undertaken over time.

Perhaps the greatest testament to the success of Pierre Bourdieu's sociological project is the fact that, in significant instances, even his critics take their leave from premises his project has established. Notwithstanding his repeated claims to have been 'misinterpreted' on account of a number of factors (Bourdieu, 2005a: 33), it remains that these purported misunderstandings can be accurately described as 'well-founded' misunderstandings. That is, they are not merely trading in alien impositions on Bourdieu's work but are touching on some of the profound unresolved and, perhaps, irresolvable tensions that Bourdieu himself strove to overcome. Or so I argue. I propose that certain recent discussions, on the whole rather critical of Bourdieu's positions, nevertheless mobilize particular conceptions of sociological phenomena that originate in Bourdieu's own work—conceptions that, upon reflection, reveal themselves to be confused and hastily expressed: I intend here the relation between the social agent and her environment and the place of consciousness in this relation. By returning to Bourdieu's own discussion of these concepts, and their development in his oeuvre, we are afforded other means of construing the important phenomena that these ideas seek to capture.

The tensions to which I refer are exemplified in the concept of habitus, whose name – as Bourdieu (1977: 218) was well aware – both calls to mind a mechanistic philosophy<sup>1</sup> and, at the same time, seeks to combat it 'from within', by defining itself in terms of the dimensions of 'tact, dexterity, [and] savoir-faire' (1977: 10). As I will show, it is not simply a misinterpretation to suppose that the habitus is mechanistically deployed, for it does appear in this mode in Bourdieu's work. Yet its appearance under this guise should not be taken as paradigmatic or as exhausting the possibilities inherent in the concept—especially since its underlying premises militate against this reading. Nevertheless, among critics and those deploying the concept, habitus is often expressed in mechanistic terms, as if it were simply 'habit', rendering practice a mere execution of an 'internalized program' (as it is put by Boltanski, 2012: 339). From such a schema it follows that the 'environment' serves only as a constant background, a support for habitual practice, rendering the social agent a 'fish in

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<sup>1</sup> In this article I understand by mechanism, in Bourdieu's terms, a way of construing events (such as actions and responses) in the form of an interlinked chain of 'moments in a sequence of programmed actions produced by a mechanical apparatus' (Bourdieu 1977: 73).

water’—at least until the environment no longer serves as a support and, according to this mechanistic narrative, conscious direction takes over.

Since commentators have clustered their arguments around the place of consciousness in Bourdieu’s work – either to decry its ostensible denigration or to see in it an opportunity for political action – it is important to examine its shifting role and successive manifestations in his work. I will suggest that rather than denoting a kind of necessary predicate of practice or, worse, an anthropological supposition, the purported ‘unconscious’ quality of practice simply represents a means of pointing out the non-subjective nature of meaning characterizing any social practice, a means of stating that such significance is irreducible to one’s conscious intentions. This has the consequence of supposing that one can indeed be lucid in one’s actions and at the same time be ‘unconscious’, for the former is an anthropological phenomenon and the latter is an epistemological statement. Still, while this *should* result in Bourdieu remaining at cross-purposes from recent debates about the place of deliberation in ‘practice theory’, it is complicated by the fact that Bourdieu made efforts to enter this debate, under the guise of ‘position[ing] habitus against voluntaristic philosophies of action’ (Elder-Vass, 2007: 328)—to the detriment, I believe, of his initial point.

This article takes a common triad of concerns – agent, environment, consciousness – and aims to extirpate from the relations among them the mechanistic traces that remain in Bourdieu’s discussions and that repeatedly surface in commentary around them. I discuss, in turn, the ambivalent role of ‘consciousness’, which oscillates between methodological postulate and anthropological datum; the confused depiction the social agent’s relation to the world; and, more positively, the manner by which social agents forge this world in the struggle over its stakes. I ultimately come to argue that a mechanistic approach reifies terms – such as ‘consciousness’ and ‘world’ – that ought to remain relational and subject to definition in their practical interrelation—an interrelation, I must add, that necessarily occurs in *time*. To his own disservice, with respect to this latter point, Bourdieu’s phenomenological penchant for concrete examples like moves on a football field, encourages the kind of hypostatizing of the social space that neglects that it is in fact comprised of a structure of probabilities and is only ever produced in time, through the practices and struggle that take place within it.

## Consciousness as a functional principle

In the vexed domain of ‘consciousness’ – the frequency of its presence, its explanatory weight vis-à-vis ‘unconscious’ determination, its practical potency, and its political potential – the situation I referred to at the outset, where certain formulations of Bourdieu have come to be taken as unquestioned points of departure for his commentators and critics, is most palpable: sketched broadly, in this picture Bourdieu proposes first that in comparison to unconscious determination, we operate with some kind of ‘conscious’ lucidity but a small part of the time (Jenkins, 1992: 46; Bourdieu, 1984: 474); second, that unconscious determination is analogically aligned with the body (Noble and Watkins, 2003: 529; Bourdieu, 1977: 94); third, that lucidity emerges in moments of major or minor ‘crisis’ (Crossley, 2013: 151; Ermakoff, 2010: 541; Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 131); and fourth, that this resultant lucidity offers some means of counteracting symbolic violence, necessarily so inasmuch as the latter operates unconsciously and in the folds of the body (McNay, 1999: 35; Bourdieu, 2001).

This article challenges the picture comprised by these elements, and suggests that Bourdieu offers an alternate one that better expresses his overall project, accounting for phenomena in a more rigorous fashion. In particular, the above picture rests on the idea of consciousness as some kind of anthropological presupposition, whereas this alternate picture remains mostly indifferent to this issue. So, despite all his evocative sketches of unconscious practice, the notion of ‘unconscious’ is first deployed as an epistemological presupposition – as ‘non-conscious’ practice – rather than as any kind of anthropological or psychological characteristic:

What might be called the principle of non-consciousness, conceived as the *sine qua non* for the constitution of sociological science, is nothing other than the reformulation in the logic of that science of the principle of methodological determinism which no science can reject without disowning itself as a science. This is what is obscured when the principle of non-consciousness is expressed in the vocabulary of the unconscious. Those who do so thereby transform a methodological postulate into an anthropological thesis (Bourdieu et al., 1991: 16)

At least at this stage and in this domain ‘non-consciousness’ or, if the word be used, the ‘unconscious’, operates as a functional rather than substantial term, denoting a presupposition that sociology must make if it is to be considered ‘scientific’. It refers not to a kind of hidden determinant of practice, but to the objectivity of meaning, to the fact that the one who, willy-nilly, produces meaning does not remain its ‘master and possessor’ (1991: 17).

Bourdieu’s position is aphoristically captured in the following: ‘it is because subjects do not, strictly speaking, know [*savent*] what they are doing that what they do has more meaning than they know’ (Bourdieu, 1977: 79). This is to state neither that actors are in some sense robotically – and so ‘unconsciously’ – following a kind of ‘program’ deposited deep within, nor that, as Jenkins puts it, ‘although actors may understand their behavior as the pursuit of known goals and objectives, the sociologist (Bourdieu) knows better’ (Jenkins, 1992: 45; Sayer, 2005: 29). Conscious goals and awareness of one’s actions, not to mention the existence of a constant ‘stream of consciousness’, are in no sense inconsistent with this *epistemological* principle of non-consciousness. To give an example of Bourdieu’s own as a means of drawing the distinction, take a literary author, somebody about whom it would be difficult to argue that he is simply following a program or is acting with mere automaticity:

If you ask a canonical writer: “What is it that you are doing?”, and he responds: “I’m writing a novel”, he knows what he is doing. They are intentions. But he does not know that he enacts a whole theory-cum-practice of the novel that orients all his choices from its first moment  
(Bourdieu, 2013b: 89)

If it be protested that this is giving short shrift to the canonical author, who perhaps ‘knows’ in some explicit and thematized sense what he is doing, we can remove all doubt by taking an avant-garde, ‘ironic’ author, who – if nothing else – *knows* what she is doing. Yet the argument still stands: while she knows what the naïve canonical author ignored, and perhaps even parodies it, she does not therefore know the sociologically pertinent information, the objective conditions that impel her toward her ironic pursuit. *Strictly speaking*, then, lucidity and deliberative capacity do not, especially in the moment of deliberation, grant one escape from ‘non-conscious’ determination, which again is not some deposited program leaving us more or less ‘at the mercy of our habitus’ (Elder-Vass, 2007: 344), but is a gesture towards the

endlessly ‘thrown’ nature of social action: its meaning, in the absence of a great deal of social-scientific labor, extends beyond our ability to appropriate it.

To reduce the distinction to one of automatism, routine, or habit *rather than* consciousness is to miss Bourdieu’s point. There is implied in such a reading an erroneous conflation of automatism and habitus, as if together these vie with conscious deliberation for causal supremacy. Such is demonstrably erroneous insofar as one can be ‘to some degree aware of [one’s] habitual responses as they occur’ (Throop and Murphy, 2002: 199), and for all that still orient oneself according to a set of socially structured criteria, ‘internalized’ in the form of habitus. Social determination need not be *experienced* as some kind of alien imposition. Instead, at least according to Bourdieu, it is experienced in terms of the “socially innocent language of likes and dislikes” (Bourdieu, 1984: 243). Taking up the phenomenological strain of Bourdieu’s work, we can express these possibilities of like and dislike, “attraction” and “repulsion”, in a number of ways: in Merleau-Ponty’s (2012: 52) objects which call out to us and which we grasp “in [their] signification for us”, and in Gibson’s (1979: 127) “affordances”, the aspects of the environment that show up and beckon or threaten an organism so disposed to recognize them as such. It must be noted that interactions with the surrounding world do not represent arbitrary designations assigned to otherwise indifferent configurations of stimuli, but a profound attunement to a reality with which one has had prolonged experience. Thus, a cliff that looks dangerous *is* dangerous (Martin, 2011: 184) and a social position that looks like it cannot be occupied will have a hard time being occupied by the one who so beholds it—regardless of whether one’s action in relation to it is “automatic” or not (pace Leschziner and Green, 2013: 123). Ultimately, for Bourdieu, what is crucial is that it appear *reasonable* to adopt a particular posture before the world, it being given that one has been prepared by a personal and – to an extent – collective history for a certain future.

The diversity of relations to objective possibilities can be imagined on a scale: at one pole, where “habitual” and automatic reactions predominate, certain objectively existent opportunities are not even perceived (e.g., the elite education that barely even impinges on the conscious awareness of the one who has “no chance” of appropriating it). As we progress away from this pole, such “opportunities” can be

perceived as existing, but are just not “for me” or “for us”, whether for reasons of explicit distaste or for reasons of inability of access. That is, they experientially lack a “vital” or “affordance” character. While perceived, they do not “call out” to those who, in effect, perceive them as inaccessible or as undesirable. The next point on the scale posits that certain opportunities might appear as attractive and even be chosen *despite* one’s disposition. This is the ideal-typical extreme preferred by those who exalt conscious deliberation, and for whom one’s conscious resolution is determinant. In such a case – which Bourdieu’s theory in no way “prohibits”, but would certainly presume improbable – it would be expected that attempted occupation of such positions result in significantly higher levels of “attrition” amongst those not otherwise disposed to occupy them. Bourdieu’s probabilistic logic assumes not that these seeming miracles do not happen, but that they are anomalous and that the “tension” experienced by the “pretender” would bring about either his eventual relinquishing of his hopes or a different mode of occupying the position (so that the pretender who occupies the throne represents a vastly different phenomenon than its occupation by the one “destined” to do so) (Bourdieu, 1984: 337).

Here the danger of conflating habitus with routine and automaticity is exposed. Habitus amounts to more than a corollary of the simple unconscious “complicity” of conditions of production and conditions of existence. It is the evolving product of an embodied history that prepares one for a particular future which makes other futures improbable—if not, strictly speaking, “unthinkable” and certainly not logically “impossible”. So as we verge toward the other end of the scale, we reach the point at which there dawns a sense that something is “for me/us”, even if this is not necessarily the case. (It is in these middle areas that “allodoxia” – the belief that something is “for me”, when it is more or less unlikely to be so – is most likely to occur.) Next, it becomes rather obvious that something is “for me”, and is perhaps even undoubtedly so. Finally we must mention “*amor fati*”: in this case not only is such an objective possibility obviously a destination, but it is desirably so. Yet even at this end of the scale there is still much *effort* necessary to realize one’s position. This presence of effort ought to signal the firm incompatibility between practice through the lens of habitus and simple automatisms and routine behaviors. (It even, perhaps, allows for the possibility of a peculiarly Bourdieusian notion of “will” [cf. Throop 2010: 29].)



While the picture of consciousness that I described at the outset can indeed be found in Bourdieu, and has certainly been productive in terms of contributing a position to current debates around the role of “cognition” in sociology, I argue that the alternate one has a sounder basis in Bourdieu’s work, much of which it undergirds, and better reflects the reality of social life, where it is difficult to deny that “a partial, lacunary, discontinuous form of consciousness always accompanies practices” (Bourdieu, 1972: 200). I implied that the most pernicious effect of this construal was the conflation of habitus and a kind of thoughtless routine and “habit”. Such a conflation, I now assert, has important implications for how we conceive of practice in relation to a “world” (or, among its many guises, a “space”, “field”, or “environment”). Specifically, a hasty mobilization of some of Bourdieu’s own comments around the relation between agent and environment results in a reification of both terms of this relation and a failure to appreciate the crucial roles of time and of practice as processes.

### **Routine, crisis, and reflection**

Having argued in the first section that by conflating habitus and automatic practice we reify a functional notion, I wish to argue here that a hypostatized conception of the social world results from holding tight to such a picture (of practice as the automatic and unconscious execution of a program). In my enumeration of the various aspects of the standard Bourdieu “picture” of practice, I listed the proposition that conscious lucidity emerges in times of crisis—in times where there is a breakdown in the “fit” between an agent’s dispositions and the objective “conditions” in which they ordinarily flourish. Here I wish to focus on this aspect and suggest that the construction underlying it is riddled with troublesome issues deriving from certain presumptions about the character of these objective “conditions”, about what we think the “world” is. Conventionally, it suggests a static world, typified by the experience of the individual amidst her concrete surrounds, within which everything is always already laid out, and the social agent either matches these surrounds or does not. It thereby *neglects time*, and with it the labors of anticipatory adjustment, deferral, and attempted subversion through struggle, each of which result in this state of the world being brought about.

This view of a hypostatized world is common to several sociologists who mobilize a form of the idea that conscious lucidity emerges in the breakdown of the relationship between habit and world. Certain among them make a historical argument: the increasing rapidity of change in various domains, concomitant with the proliferation of such domains, has brought about an intensification in the number or severity of dislocations between objective structures and their internalized counterparts.<sup>2</sup> A corollary to this argument is that Bourdieu's theory becomes obsolete. This is especially so, Archer argues, since such a concept as habitus was formed to account for the static reproduction of an undifferentiated society, far from the one that we encounter daily (see also Haber, 2004: 197). Indeed, this latter, contemporary society is far even from 1960s France, where the concept was most frequently deployed: "the young of the new millennium...no longer live in Bourdieu's world" (Archer, 2012: 68). In this changed world, the "habitual, routinized, or customary action" that served past generations can only founder (Archer: 47): "Swift change renders habitual guidelines to action of decreasing relevance or positively misleading". In their place come to stand conscious efforts and resolute struggles on the part of the acting agent, who "internally converse[s] about the person they would like to become and the job which will best express this" (Archer, 2000: 290-291). Lahire mounts a similar critique to Archer but turns his focus away from ultimate life decisions to relatively minor, "polymorphous crises that beset actors in their everyday lives" (Lahire, 2011: 45). These minor crises in their turn impose the need for a kind of reflection on practice in the moment, as well as the need for recourse to auxiliary tools to compensate for what Lahire sees as the failures of a habitual, practical sense. Like Archer, Lahire (2011: 21) sees a concept forged for "traditional Algerian peasant society" as unsuitable for analysis of what he calls our present-day "ultra-differentiated societies" (Lahire: 28). In these latter formations, the clash of multiple determinations, each characteristic of one of many persistent logics, demands from the actor a conscious computation and weighing up of options on offer.

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<sup>2</sup> This can be seen as a Bourdieusian version of the Beck "reflexive modernization" thesis: "the more societies are modernized, the more agents (subjects) acquire the ability to reflect on the social conditions of their existence and to change them accordingly" (Beck, 1994:174). See Adkins (2003), Crossley (2001: 114), Sweetman (2003: 541), and McNay (1999) with direct respect to Bourdieu.

Other commentators make a similar argument but instead of suggesting a kind of historical obsolescence of the concept, make reference to its unsuitability for capturing generic “mismatches”, necessarily occasioned in everyday life insofar as unforeseen and “chance” occurrences are present. In this vein, Crossley compares Bourdieu unfavorably to Dewey regarding their respective levels of sensitivity to the minor “disruptions” of “the taken-for-granted world that our habits are attuned to” (2013: 151; see also Elder-Vass: 331). Smith (2004: 110), similarly, finds in the novelist Marcel Proust a “more balanced picture of life” than that provided by Bourdieu, for whom “the self [is] imprisoned by habit and engaging in repetitive tasks and mental routines” (109). Proust’s depiction, by contrast, is ostensibly superior because of its recognition of the “oscillations between habituated action and reflexive self-awareness”, amidst “those chance collisions of life that provide a shock and with them some distance from the routinized and habituated” (110). Each such attempt, whether making a historical or generic argument about the relative frequency and the effect of these “shocks”, takes for granted a “routine/reflexivity dialectic” (Lahire, 2013: 147) and the mechanistic assumptions bound up with it.

Each of these engagements with Bourdieu’s thought clearly expresses itself in the terms that I rehearsed above in my discussion of consciousness. This pertains especially to the reduction of practice associated with habitus to some kind of “routine”. With conscious deliberation opposed so firmly to routine, and with the latter defined in such close association to habitus, it can only follow that a break in routine introduces conscious deliberation—and so habitus, conflated with “routine”, is defined out of relevance. I propose in the remainder of this section that this usage ignores the other potentials the concept offers, for it either restricts its level of application to some kind of immediate, concrete, and tangible “situation”, or it takes this situation as exemplary and abstracts from it accordingly. Nevertheless, as my initial statements express, I maintain that Bourdieu’s own work – or, more specifically, Bourdieu’s occasional statements about his work – give a source for this peculiar mobilization of the concept, above all through his rhetoric and means of exemplification.

The troublesome component in many of Bourdieu’s statements, inherited by those deploying the critical “routine/reflection” usage, centers on the character of the

second half of the “agent and world” dyad (Bourdieu, 1990a: 10). Here, the world functions as a concrete stage upon which practice unfolds, and is indifferent to it, so that the world is, paradoxically, only analytically pertinent when it is no longer present, when there is a “breakdown” in the concordance between objective and internalized structures. This derives from a hasty abstraction from certain of Bourdieu’s seductive examples of practical sense “in action”. Take for instance a sample of Bourdieu’s illustrations of practice—the football “move” (Bourdieu, 1990b: 82), the missed shot of the tennis player, the elevator stopping prematurely (2000: 211), the co-ordination of traffic around the Place de la Bastille (2001: 1), all of which are intended to convey the idea contained in Bourdieu’s notion of the “forthcoming”. This phenomenological manner of expression encourages a form of thinking about sociological phenomena that unwittingly transposes them into the realm of the concrete, hypostatizing a space of distributions of capital into an always-existing “setting”.

The result is a hypostatizing of the social world, encouraging one to forget that the “field” is not just that upon which players make their moves but is the *product of* those moves. A hypostatized conception interferes with an adequate understanding of Bourdieu’s attempts to elucidate the agent’s relation to the environment and the breakdowns encountered between them. I refer here to the notion of a “coincidence” of, or “concordance” between, internalized and objective structures. Bourdieu is never clear on precisely what this entails. For instance, within the space of a few lines of one article (Bourdieu, 1974: 4), Bourdieu oscillates between significantly different formulations of the relation between the conditions of acquisition and implementation of habitus: while the two conditions must “coincide perfectly” and be “identical”, at the same time Bourdieu suggests they merely be “similar”, “homothetic”, and “objectively compatible” (1974: 5). Later Bourdieu employs the even more benign suggestion that dispositions be “adjusted” to the conditions of their implementation. This obscurity is repeated in several other places throughout his oeuvre, leaving the reader with no means of determining precisely how proximate dispositions must be to conditions if practice is to remain “ontologically complicit”. Yet I suggest that this obscurity is in some sense necessary, and all these adjectives – however incompatible – are accurate, for the relation between these two terms cannot be precisely delineated

by theoretical “dictate”, since this assumes the relation to be characterized by two constants, when in fact the two variables remain for the agent to resolve in practice.

From his earliest writings Bourdieu warned of succumbing to the hypostatizing tendency, which he then labeled the “realism of the structure” (Bourdieu, 1968). This consists in “hypostatiz[ing] the systems of objective relations in already constructed totalities, outside the history of the individual or the group” (1968: 705). It is avoided by recalling that

...ultimately, objective relations do not exist and do not really realize themselves except in and through the *system of dispositions* of the agents, produced by the internalization of objective conditions. Between the system of objective regularities and the system of directly observable conducts a mediation always intervenes which is nothing else but the habitus, geometrical locus of determinisms and of individual determination, of calculable probabilities and of lived-through hopes, of objective future and subjective plans (705)

Bourdieu refers to this “hypostasis” structuralist model as a “mechanistic” one, wherein agents contribute nothing in particular to the execution of the model forged by the sociologist, but remain epiphenomenal “bearers” of its tendencies. I suggest that Bourdieu’s own conception, by contradistinction, is closer to Canguilhem’s (1991: 197-198), who wrote of the domain of the living:

Certainly this environment, which science defines, is made of laws but these laws are theoretical abstractions. The living creature does not live among laws but among creatures and events which vary these laws.... For the living being life is not a monotonous deduction, a rectilinear movement, it ignores geometrical rigidity, it is discussion [*débat*] or explanation (what Goldstein calls *Auseinandersetzung*) with an environment where there are leaks, holes, escapes and unexpected resistances

This notion of a “debate”, or *Auseinandersetzung*, in which each term in the relation is constituted by its place within the relation appears to capture quite well the “vision” (Schumpeter, 1946: 501) driving Bourdieu’s work. On the one hand, the “subject” term, the habitus, is formed out of the agent’s “dialectical confrontation” (Bourdieu, 2005a: 31) with a given situation or social space. On the other hand, the “object”

term, the situation or social space, functions insofar as the habitus activates the “possibilities inscribed” therein (Maître and Bourdieu, 1994: xix). Bourdieu writes not only that habitus is necessary to “keep [institutions] in activity, continuously pulling them from the state of dead letters” but also that by reviving them in this way, the habitus “impos[es] the revisions and transformations that reactivation entails” (Bourdieu, 1990b: 57). It is in these revisions and transformations that much of my argument is located: it makes little sense to think of the relation between agent and world as characterized by some simple correspondence between pre-existing dispositions and positions. Rather, a constant process of adjustment, an interested striving to “meet” the environment, prevails—with the environment, or elements thereof, in turn re-constructed in a manner befitting the striver. The world is made in this twin process of adjustment and construction, for the agent is always “looking forward” to something, and is not simply facing a series of instantaneous presents.

So the social “world” – as a “structure of probabilities” – whether in the form of a social space, or in its derivation as field, should not be conceived as analogous to a mere concrete setting or situation. Such a reification entails a decidedly atemporal conception of practice, where one relates to a world that is always already there. If we take as paradigmatic the kind of practice that occurs in a concrete, immediate “situation”, as Lahire does in his investigations of quotidian lapses in practical sense, it is understandable that we would arrive at his conclusions. After all, we are surrounded by concrete *things* that patently persist beyond our immediate practices. The keyboard hardly requires my typing to pull it from the state of a “dead letter”, and the action of my fingers imposes no revisions on its being. Yet such thinking, when applied to sociological phenomena, falls victim to what Bachelard (1984: 40) termed a “thingist” approach, in which an everyday experience of reality – here an experience of concrete matter, with all its inert and massy connotations and evocations – is substituted for a scientific one. It remains nevertheless that Bourdieu himself is at ease in abstracting from concrete practices, taking such phenomena as representative of a generic practical sense (Bourdieu, 2000: 162). In one such example, he captures the breakdown in practical sense by reference to “the experience, familiar to all of us, of the unexpected feeling that occurs when a lift, instead of going straight down to the ground floor, stops at the first floor, where someone has called it” (2000: 211). While such exemplifications have the obvious advantage of evoking for the reader a

“concrete intuition” (2005a: 28), they bear a specific difficulty when attempting to articulate the kinds of sociological phenomena that such concepts as *habitus* and *field* are invoked to explain. These latter kinds of phenomena – like diploma value, class future, and the emergence of occupational categories – bear little formal resemblance to such an experience as travelling on an elevator, for the significant reason that in the latter, time is unproblematic: I experience a sudden and instantaneous *shock* when the elevator stops prematurely, but the temporal gap between the “objective” devaluation (or the initial trigger for the devaluation) of my university degree and my “subjective” realization of this fact offers innumerable opportunities for, and even successive experiences of, denial, deferral, compensation, or subversion—all of whose outcome *may* be a kind of belated “shock” experience. We are here a long way from the quotidian conception, from Smith’s (2004: 110) “chance collisions of life”.

### **The struggle over the production of time**

Despite at one time insisting that the “forthcoming” [*à venir*] should not be mistaken for an imminent future, so that even distant moments, “provided they are tied to [the present] by the unity of signification”, can “offer opportunities [*potentialités*] perceived as co-present” (Bourdieu, 2013a: 65), Bourdieu tends to express himself in terms that presuppose the imminence of the forthcoming, with almost dramatic effect. This is clear in the analogies listed above, all predicated on instantaneous “shock” experiences, but it is also present in the “instantaneist” way of expressing certain sociological phenomena. For example, Bourdieu refers to the disentanglement of objective chances and subjective hopes as occurring by an “abrupt slump” of the former in relation to the latter (Bourdieu, 1984: 168). Elsewhere he and Wacquant (1992: 131) write of this relation being “brutally disrupted”. Finally, Bourdieu makes reference to the “sudden, brutal devaluation” of those whose hopes were bound up with a previous state of the matrimonial market (Bourdieu, 2007: 64).<sup>3</sup>

The point is not simply that what are taken as sudden shifts, akin to the shock of a premature halt in an elevator, are actually processes, but that they are transformations

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<sup>3</sup> This is obviously not to deny the empirical existence of situations of “crisis or sudden change” (2000: 161), but it is to deny that these ought to be taken as paradigmatic instances of “change” or transformation.

*actively brought about or realized* in duration. In this latter conception, equally locatable in Bourdieu's work, time is not the mechanical unfolding of events impervious to one's actions (Bourdieu, 2000: 206). Rather, it is the product of practice: "practice is not *in* time, but *makes* time". The ascent and eclipse of aesthetic movements provide examples of this manner of "making" time: in the event of their decline, dominants are brought down by an interested effort on the part of upstarts to displace and out-mode them, rather than by any kind of foregone "mechanical sliding into the past", as is the case with natural ageing (Bourdieu, 1996a: 157). This similarly describes another example of Bourdieu's: the "devaluation" of university degrees occasioned by the expansion of the student population. Therein we observe the processes bringing about the production of time. I refer here to the "temporal gap", imbued with significance, between the instant in which there appear within the university field the first intimations of change and the moment of realization, the "outbreak of open crises" (Bourdieu, 1988: 166). This realization is hardly reducible to a "shock" experience – that is, the mechanistic failure of an expectation to be fulfilled – especially because the temporal gap affords numerous potentialities and alternate historical courses. Rather, the misalignment of "slump" is actively brought about. Recall that the objective environment here, notwithstanding its immense "weight" and objectivity, consists in a structure *of probabilities*, that is, in *chances* regarding the future (Bourdieu, 2000: 211). We are not dealing with a world in which everything has already happened, as in the concrete exemplification of the "situation", in which the world is simply laid out before the actor. It is, rather, a practical accomplishment, subject to constant re-production.

At its most elaborate, drawing on that strain in Bourdieu's thought that concerns the potential symbolic efficacy of political struggle, my argument implies that the realized world is affected by the manner of its realization—one's "approach" or "attitude" toward it. Since the world, produced through practice of a temporal nature, always remains to be made or re-made, and since institutions and possibilities always await their reanimation and concordant deformation, we must recognize the importance of what is owed to the relation between the agent's approach and the world that is produced or reproduced in the encounter. From this principle derives Bourdieu's interest, beginning in the 1970s, in performative statements – "naming" and "social magic" – and in such phenomena as the "self-fulfilling prophecy", in each



of which is posed the political and symbolic question of the definition of reality. These are urgently present in a series of writings in the 1970s, when the fate of the French peasantry was at stake and appeared to pivot on whether the peasants themselves would accept as realistic a particularly pessimistic representation of their future (Bourdieu and Boltanski, 1978: 215).

At stake in such a struggle over a representation of reality is the character of reality itself (Bourdieu refers to it as a struggle over “the principles of di-vision”). The vision of the world really impacts upon its contours and divisions. To put this in terms consistent with the example, it can be said that the peasants’ manner of approaching reality will – if only to an extent, in conjunction with other factors (Bourdieu, 1990b: 141) – come to determine this reality, by determining the “space of possibles” open to them. This suggestion, that the manner of approaching reality, of “realizing” it, impacts on the constitution of that reality itself, remains nonsensical so long as we conceive of the relation to the social world on the paradigm of the relation of the individual to a concrete situation. Heidegger’s hammer does not yield to the dimensions of the fingers, but the social world, at least in certain respects, yields to the expectations of those who face it.

While this performative dimension obviously entails the possibility of “change”, perhaps even political change for the better, Bourdieu certainly has, for various reasons, a predilection for identifying the continuities and repetitions, the “reproduction” of existing relations. Yet we must recall that such reproduction is by no means a *fait accompli*, but is the product of a *process* brought about through practice oriented by a particular view of the future, leading to what Bourdieu calls the “causality of the probable”:

the causality of the probable is the result of this kind of dialectic between the habitus, whose practical anticipations rest on all previous experience, and the probable significations, that is, the given that it gives itself by a selective apperception and a biased appreciation of the indices of the future that it must contribute to bringing about [*faire advenir*] (things “do to”, “to say”, etc.): practices are the result of this encounter between a predisposed and forewarned agent, and a *presumed world*, that is, a foreseen and prejudged world, the only one that he can ever know (Bourdieu, 1974: 28)

Of course, if it need be noted again, the causality or “fatalism” of the probable is but one course of action, and sociological inquiry – producing “knowledge of the probable” – offers the possibility for “a rejection of the probable based on the scientific mastery of the laws of production governing the eventuality rejected” (Bourdieu, 1991: 136).

### **The struggle over the course of the world**

Since Bourdieu’s world, an eminently historical one, is temporally structured, the gap between the first movement of a transformation and its plain manifestation should be seen less as an intellectual “realization” than as a realization in the sense of a practical accomplishment. The “environment” is only ever revealed as it is realized through agents’ practices. This is to take seriously what Bourdieu means by the social world being the object of struggle: it is never “settled” and to register it in statistical analysis is but to take a snapshot of “a given moment” of the struggle, to “freeze” it in its “endless fluctuations” (Bourdieu, 1984: 245-246; Bourdieu, 1990b: 141). I shall conclude this paper with a brief survey of the auxiliary components of Bourdieu’s model, as a means of further clarifying what I posit as a “flexible” relation between the social agent and the social world. The components in question are “transposition” and “reconversion”. In different ways they subtend several of the processes identified by such concepts as habitus and field.

Transposition is a primordial mode by which the agent relates to the world. It is inherent in the notion of habitus, as demonstrated by Bourdieu’s recollection of the empirical origins of the latter concept: “I was struck to see, for example, in the case of peasants, how their attitude to the development of their farming is at one with their attitude toward the education of their children. Here it is a *single attitude toward the future*” (Bourdieu, 1966a: 7). The transposition of dispositions entails a decidedly non-mechanistic approach and as such cannot be reduced to a “transfer” of practices across different domains, as Lahire attempts to do in suggesting that the motor skills bound up with skiing and rock-climbing meet their limit of transferability in moving, respectively, “from mountain skiing to water-skiing” (Lahire, 2010: 85) and from indoor to outdoor rock climbing. But this is firstly to fall into tautology, defining a motor skill as “skiing” and then claiming that it can only be deployed in “ski-like”

situations, and it is secondly to negate Bourdieu's relationalist, sociological approach from the outset: such a habitus as the one underlying rock climbing – the “most ascetic form of the aesthetic disposition” (Bourdieu, 1984: 267) – is transposable to a practice like museum-going (and others of “the culturally most legitimate and economically cheapest practices”), all the while not supposing that the “same motor skills” – strictly defined – are being deployed. We are here dealing with something more profound than simple psychological schemes (pace Lizardo, 2004).

The idea of a transfer of habits, furthermore, would take us back to the idea of an ahistorical “context” that serves merely as a backdrop to the activation of inclinations and skills. From here derives the superficial “shock” model, of breakdown incurred by travel *between* fields. The latter are, for those authors who make use of this notion, conceived analogous to physical spaces. In place of such a statically defined habitus specific to each field – in which habitus would be ineffectual outside of that domain in which it was acquired – we ought to think of an *underlying* principle “of practices performed in fields governed by different logics and therefore inducing different forms of realization” (Bourdieu, 1984: 101). The habitus is accessed through “the typically Leibnizian method of possible worlds, [uncovering] several realizations of the same habitus” (Bourdieu, 1996a: 379).

Transposition implies flexibility to respond in stylistically homologous manners to the diverse realities or faces of reality presented to the actor. Here, a program – which operates on a *ceteris paribus* assumption (Dreyfus, 1992: 57) – fails. The capacity of a generative principle to have recourse to manifest practices different than those undertaken as a matter of automatic routine confirms the central advantage of a non-mechanistic conception of habitus. Transposition entails on the one hand similarity enough between the initial set of conditions and the conditions of “deployment”, and on the other enough dissimilarity to render some “bridging” action necessary: “two ‘realities’ are never entirely alike in all respects but are always alike in some respect, at least indirectly” (Bourdieu, 1990b: 88; Hage, 2013: 87). Far from being reducible to a mechanical “scheme transfer”, then, transposition figures as another indicator of the specificity of habitus vis-à-vis ‘habit’: given a practical imperative for the ‘economical use of polysemy, fuzzy logic, vagueness, approximation’ (Bourdieu, 2000: 57), habitual routine and strictly defined specific skills cannot be relied upon, as

they would result in ‘breakdown’ each time an unanticipated situation appears. Thinking of habitus, rather, as a generative principle offers a way of going beyond this ‘given’. This is habitus as ‘dexterous’ and inventive, emerging from a confrontation between a set of practical principles and the world to which it relates.

As seen through the prism of habitus, practice is far from a repetition of the same practice in the same conditions. Rather it involves a series of more or less creative acts undertaken over time, implying ‘a margin of tolerance for the inconstancies of the environment’ (Canguilhem, 1991: 197). In the face of unexpected circumstances, one is hardly fated to catastrophe, but instead strives to apply one’s dispositions in other ways; that is, one is encouraged to transpose them into another ‘key’. In this way the habitus ‘provides a practical mastery of situations of uncertainty’ (Bourdieu, 2005b: 214), and enables ‘agents to cope with unforeseen and constantly changing situations’ (1990b: 61).<sup>4</sup> (The question becomes an empirical one of determining precisely how tolerant a habitus can be of variably volatile circumstances for practice to remain in the state of ‘going without saying’.) Transposition can thus be seen as a form of ‘dexterity’, an option whose full significance is realized when we consider ‘reconversion’. Reconversion refers to the strategy undertaken to maintain or augment one’s position at the cost of relinquishing a declining form of capital in the hopes (by no means assured) of exchanging it for an ascendant or stable form. Here one intuits the inception of a crisis or decline and seeks to forestall it. Reconversion also offers yet another reason why habitus is irreducible to anything like routines or ‘skills’ and why the sense of orientation it implies cannot be exhausted by the subjective experience or reporting of the latter: as Bourdieu notes, the practices grouped together under the term reconversion can be experienced as a life-changing personal ‘conversion’, perhaps implying a shift in one’s calling, yet with respect to the one’s position in social space it involves a maintenance of the same (1996b: 291). That is, the same internalized sense of social space, or habitus, prevails amidst a

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<sup>4</sup> An unexplored avenue remains regarding this question: rather than supposing that increasing specialization and the proliferation of minor crises automatically bring about recurrent breakdown necessitating conscious deliberation, it would be as fair, from Bourdieu’s perspective, to suppose that people undertake strategies to ‘make lives in fragmented and volatile worlds rather than waiting for normalisation and reconfiguration’ (Vigh 2008: 8; see Berlant 2011: 4).

transformation of condition and all the habits and routines bound up with it (1984: 156).

Social agents undertake these contingency strategies, shifting habits and routines, as a means of retaining their social position, accomplishing this by playing on the pliability of the social world. In this light we should take seriously Bourdieu's statement that 'one *makes* for oneself an environment in which one feels "at home" and in which one can achieve that fulfilment of one's desire to be which one identifies with happiness' (2000: 150—emphasis added). This 'environment', I have sought to assert throughout, is most strictly conceived of as a space of social positions, rather than any kind of phenomenal environment, so that a shift in observable customs and clothing, for example, would not in itself constitute the kind of shift in the environment of interest to Bourdieu. Bourdieu's sociology defines environment by relative positions rather than by absolute conditions. Consequently, the habitus is primarily the 'sense' of social space (the structure of positions) that the agent possesses. The conditioned skills and habits bound up with their positions remain secondary, as suggested by agents willing, through reconversion, to dispense with them in order to retain position (1984: 455).

## **Conclusion**

The foregoing primes us to explore some difficult issues in Bourdieu's work. First, a strong tension remains between condition and position (note, e.g., the language used in 1984: 172). Bourdieu remarks that class condition, a substantialist hold-over, was rightly disposed of as he came to a relational conception of social space, as defined by position (in Sapiro, 2004: 87; Bourdieu, 1966b: 204). While this might be so, it remains that the concept of habitus has, so to speak, one foot in each camp: primarily and most profoundly, it implies a deep attunement to a relationally-defined social position; yet it also suggests, with the language of 'conditioning', an unyielding place for class condition. Most of the commentary has heretofore favored this latter dimension at the expense of attention to relational position, a fact that concords with the intense focus on habit. By retaining a confused sense of the two facets – or by ignoring their difference completely – we have not yet begun to examine the interrelations between them.

Still, if the space of positions is granted primacy, then we must ask what place there is for ‘condition’ and all that is bound up with it. I refer here in particular to the body. If, against Lahire, I argue that transposition involves something more ‘profound’ than the transfer of motor skills from one activity to another, but rather a *social* sense of orientation allowing for one principle to conceivably result in apparently vastly different behaviors, then what do we gain from imputing this principle to the body, or to the body in any recognizable form? Formulated otherwise, if it be granted that the same disposition underlies rock-climbing and museum visitation – an eminently defensible proposition from a relational perspective – then why is it necessary to refer to the ‘body’ as the pivot and unifying point of practice in the world? What specific properties does the body possess that would grant it such a role? Put most bluntly, what is the status of the body in Bourdieu? While his innovation certainly makes the important step of overcoming a strictly ‘semiotic’ conception of the body and emphasizes the material basis of human finitude, we ought to ask whether the body plays any greater role than as a functional term: that into which is projected, and through which is extolled, all non-cognitive properties hitherto derided by the dominant philosophical tradition (Martin and George, 2006: 126).<sup>5</sup>

In any case, I have offered a reading of Bourdieu that attempts to bring the ‘relationalist’ elements of his work into the finest focus, and in doing so clarifies much of the commentary, particularly regarding the topic of consciousness, the character of the social world, and the relations between them. Most importantly, I have suggested that manners of ‘constructing’ sociological phenomena – whether on the part of social agents themselves or those seeking to understand them – have real effects on the ‘world’ that is encountered.

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<sup>5</sup> The Bourdieusian thinker could respond that it is an error to conflate the “body” with the motor cortex, as if all practices have to be reduced to their specifically *motor* component (which would amount to reducing habitus to bodily habit). Yet this does nothing to rid us of the question of what the body *specifically* offers.

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