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SYMBOLIC POWER*

by P. Bourdieu

1 'Symbolic systems' (art, religion, language) as structuring structures

'Symbolic systems' are symbolic forms (Cassirer, 1958), instruments for constructing reality. This tradition emphasizes the cognitive function of symbols, ignoring the question of their social functions. It is concerned to grasp the specific logic of the different forms of organization of the world, the different modes of cognition (myth, language, art, science). The so-called Sapir-Whorf tradition, which sees language as an instrument of knowledge and construction of the world of objects, is an American version of the Kant-Humboldt-Cassirer tradition. In 'Perspective as a Symbolic Form', Erwin Panofsky in fact treats perspective as a historical form without going so far as systematically to reconstruct its social genesis (Panofsky, 1924).

Durkheim explicitly sets himself in the Kantian tradition (Durkheim, 1915). However, inasmuch as he seeks to give a 'positive' and 'empirical' answer to the problem of knowledge, escaping the dilemma of a priorism and empiricism, he lays the foundations for a sociology of symbolic forms (Durkheim & Mauss) (Cassirer explicitly states that he uses the concept of form of classification as an equivalent of 'symbolic form' - Cassirer, 1946, pl6). With Durkheim, forms of classification cease to be universal (transcendental) forms and become (as they implicitly are for Panofsky) social forms, i.e. arbitrary and pertaining to a particular group. One thinks of the etymological meaning of kategorēisthai, which Heidegger has reminded us of - to accuse publicly; and, by the same token, one thinks of kinship terms, the example par excellence of social categories (terms of address).

In this idealist tradition, objectivity is defined by the agreement of subjectivities, sense by consensus.

2 'Symbolic systems' as structured structures amenable to structural analysis

Structural analysis provides the methodological instruments which make it possible to achieve the neo-Kantian ambition of grasping the specific logic of each of the 'symbolic forms': by means of a tautegerical (as opposed

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SYMBOLIC INSTRUMENTS

| | | |
|---|--|---|
| as STRUCTURING STRUCTURES | as STRUCTURED STRUCTURES | as INSTRUMENTS OF DOMINATION |
| instruments for knowledge and construction of objective world | means of communication (language/culture vs. speech/ behaviour) | power division of labour (social classes) division of ideological labour (mental/manual) domination function |
| <u>Symbolic forms</u> | <u>Symbolic objects</u> | <u>Ideologies</u> |
| subjective structures (modus operandi) | objective structures (opus operatum) | (vs. myths, languages) |
| KANT - CASSIRER | HEGEL - SAUSSURE | MARX |
| SAPIR-WHORF-DURKHEIM-LEVI-STRAUSS (culturalism) MAUSS (semiology) | Social Forms of classification | Bodies of specialists competing for monopoly of legitimate symbolic production WEBER |
| Signification: objectivity as agreement of subjects (consensus) | Signification: objectivity as product of communication that is condition of communication | |

sociology of symbolic forms

contribution of symbolic power to
gnoseological order

= meaning = consensus i.e. doxa

orthodoxy

Ideological power as specific contribution
of symbolic violence (inculcation of habitus)
to political violence (domination)

Division of labour of domination

This somewhat 'scholastic' diagram is designed to give a synoptic view of the sum of the achievements of social science which have to be integrated (and superseded) in order to produce an adequate theory of symbolic power.

to allegorical) reading which relates myth to nothing other than itself, as recommended by Schelling, structural analysis seeks to establish the immanent logic of each symbolic production. But, unlike the neo-Kantian tradition, which emphasized the modus operandi, the productive activity of consciousness, the structuralist tradition privileges the opus operatum, the structured structures (Levi-Strauss, 1966, 1968). This is seen clearly in the conception which Saussure, the founder of this tradition, has of language: the structured system of the language is fundamentally treated as the condition of the intelligibility of speech, as a structured medium which must be constructed in order to account for the constant relationship between sound and sense [1].

First Synthesis

'Symbolic systems' are instruments of knowledge which exert a structuring power insofar as they are structured. Symbolic power is a power to construct reality which tends to establish a gnoseological order; the immediate meaning (sens) of the world (particularly of the social world) presupposes what Durkheim calls logical conformism, i.e. 'a homogeneous conception of time, space, number, and cause which makes agreement possible between intelligences'. Durkheim - or, after him, Radcliffe-Brown, for whom 'social solidarity' rests on the sharing of a symbolic system - has the merit of explicitly pointing to the social function which is not reducible to the structuralists' communication function. Symbols are the instruments par excellence of social integration: as instruments of knowledge and communication (cf. Durkheim's analysis of the feast), they make possible the consensus on the sense of the social world which makes a fundamental contribution toward reproducing the social order; 'logical' integration is the precondition of 'moral' integration [2].

3 'Symbolic systems' as instruments of domination

The Marxist tradition privileges the political functions of 'symbolic systems', at the expense of their logical structure and theirgnoseological function (though Engels speaks of 'systematic expression' a propos of law). This functionalism (which has nothing in common with structural functionalism à la Durkheim or Radcliffe-Brown) explains symbolic productions by relating them to the interests of the ruling class. Unlike myth, a collective product collectively appropriated and consumed, ideologies serve particular interests which they tend to present as universal interests, common to the whole group. The dominant culture contributes to the real integration of the dominant class (by ensuring immediate communication among all its members and distinguishing them from the other classes); to the fictitious integration of the society as a whole, and hence to the demobilization (false consciousness) of the dominated classes; and to the legitimation of the established order by the establishment of distinctions (hierarchies) and the legitimation of

these distinctions. The dominant culture produces its specific ideological effect by concealing its function of division (or distinction) under its function of communication: the culture which unites (a medium of communication) separates (an instrument of distinction), and legitimates distinctions by defining all cultures (designated as sub-cultures) in terms of their distance from the dominant culture (i.e. in terms of privation), identifying the latter with culture (i.e. excellence).

Second Synthesis

To refute all forms of the 'symbolist' error which reduces relations of force to relations of communication, it is not sufficient to note that relations of communication are always, inseparably, relations of power which depend, in their form and content, on the material or symbolic power accumulated by the agents (or institutions) involved in those relations and which, like the gift or the potlatch, may enable them to accumulate symbolic power. It is as structured and structuring instruments of communication and knowledge that 'symbolic systems' fulfil their political function as instruments of domination (or, more precisely, of legitimation of domination); they help to ensure the domination of one class over another (symbolic violence), adding the reinforcement of their own force to the relations of force which underlie them and so contributing, in Weber's phrase, to the 'domestication of the dominated'.

The different classes and class fractions are engaged in a specifically symbolic struggle to impose the definition of the social world that is most consistent with their interests; the field of ideological positions reproduces the field of social positions, in a transfigured form [3]. They may pursue this struggle either directly, in the symbolic conflicts of daily life, or vicariously, through the struggle between the specialists of symbolic production (full-time producers), for the monopoly of legitimate symbolic violence, i.e. the power to impose (and even inculcate) instruments of knowledge and expression (taxonomies) of social reality, which are arbitrary but not recognized as such (Weber, 1968; Bourdieu, 1971b and c) [4]. The field of symbolic production is a microcosm of the symbolic struggle between the classes: it is by serving their own interests in the struggle within the field of production (and only to that extent) that the producers serve the interests of the groups outside the field of production.

The dominant class is the locus of a struggle for the hierarchy of the principles of hierarchization (Bourdieu, 1971a). The dominant fractions, whose power is based on economic and political capital, seek to impose the legitimacy of their domination either through their own symbolic production (discourse, writings, etc) or through the intermediary of conservative ideologists who serve the interests of the dominant fractions - but only incidentally,

i.e. only to the extent they thereby serve their specific interests as professional producers. These ideologists always threaten to divert to their own advantage the power of defining the social world which they hold by delegation. The dominated fraction always tends to set cultural capital - to which it owes its position - at the top of the hierarchy of the principles of hierarchization. (This remains true of those whom the logic of the struggle within the field of cultural production leads to serve the interests of the dominant fractions.)

To insist that instruments of communication and knowledge are, as such, instruments of power is to insist that they are subordinated to practical functions and that the coherence which characterizes them is that of practical logic (contrary to the structuralist error which, attending only to the logical and gnoseological function, overestimates the internal logic of 'symbolic systems' and 'ideological systems', elliptical and allusive quasi-systematizations oriented by ethical and political dispositions) (Bourdieu, 1972).

4 Instruments of domination that can structure because they are structured, the ideological systems which specialists produce through and for the struggle for the monopoly of legitimate production reproduce the structure of the field of the social classes in a misrecognizable form, through the intermediary of the homology between the field of ideological production and the field of the social classes.

'Symbolic systems' differ fundamentally depending on whether they are produced and, by the same token, appropriated by the whole group or, on the contrary, produced by a body of specialists and, more precisely, by a relatively autonomous field of production and circulation [5]. The history of the transformation of myth into religion (ideology) is not separable from the history of the constitution of a corps of specialized producers of religious rites and discourses, i.e. the progress of the division of religious labour, which is itself a dimension of the progress of the division of social labour, and hence the division into classes (Weber, 1968; Bourdieu, 1971b); its consequences include the dispossessing of the laymen from the instruments of symbolic production [6].

Ideologies owe their structure and their most specific functions to the social conditions of their production and circulation, i.e. to the functions they fulfil, first for the specialists competing for the monopoly of the competence in question (religious, artistic, etc), and secondarily and incidentally for the non-specialists. When we insist that ideologies are always doubly determined, that they owe their most specific characteristics not only to the interests of the classes or class fractions which they express (the 'sociodicy' function) but also to the specific interests of those who produce them and to the specific logic in the field of production

(usually transfigured into the ideology of 'creation' and the 'creator'), we obtain the means of escaping crude reduction of ideological products to the interests of the classes they serve (a 'short-circuit' effect common in 'Marxist' critiques), without falling into the idealist illusion of treating ideological productions as self-sufficient and self-generating totalities amenable to pure, purely internal analysis (semiology) [7].

The specifically ideological function of the field of ideological production is performed quasi-automatically on the basis of the homology of structure between the field of ideological production, organized around the opposition between orthodoxy and heterodoxy, and the field of struggles between the classes for the maintenance or subversion of the symbolic order. This struggle is organized around the opposition between the dominant ideology, a structured, structuring medium tending to impose apprehension of the established order as natural (orthodoxy) through masked (and hence misrecognized) imposition of classificatory systems and mental structures objectively adjusted to the social structures, and heterodox (or critical) discourse, a symbolic power to mobilize and subvert which actualizes the potential power of the dominated classes by destroying the false self-evidences of orthodoxy (the fictitious restoration of doxa), and so neutralizing the power to demobilize which it contains.

The homology between the two fields causes the struggles for the specific objectives at stake in the autonomous field automatically to produce euphemized forms of the ideological struggles between the classes (Bourdieu 1975b). The fact that the correspondence is only ever effected between one system and another masks, in the eyes of the producers themselves, as well as in the eyes of the profane, the fact that the internal classificatory systems reproduce the directly political taxonomies in a misrecognizable form [8] and that the specific set of implicit axioms in each field is a transmuted form (transmuted in accordance with the specific laws of the field) of the fundamental principles of the division of labour. (For example, the university classificatory system makes explicit in a quasi-systematic form, and so legitimates, the objective divisions of the social structure and especially the division of labour - theory and practice - converting social properties into essential properties - Bourdieu, 1975d.) The specifically ideological effect consists precisely in the imposition of political systems of classification in the legitimate guise of philosophical, religious or juridical taxonomies. Symbolic systems owe their specific force to the fact that the power relations expressed in them only ever manifest themselves in the misrecognizable form of sense relations (displacement).

Symbolic power - power to constitute the given by stating it, to show forth and gain credence, to confirm or transform the world view and, through it, action on the world, and hence the world itself, quasi-magical power which

makes it possible to obtain the equivalent of what is obtained by (physical or economic) force, thanks to its specific mobilization effect - is only exerted insofar as it is recognized (i.e. insofar as its arbitrariness is misrecognized). This means that symbolic power does not lie in 'symbolic systems' in the form of an 'illocutionary force' but that it is defined in and by a determinate relationship between those who exercise power and those who undergo it, i.e. in the very structure of the field within which belief is produced and reproduced [9]. The power of words and commands, the power of words to give orders and bring order, lies in belief in the legitimacy of the words and of the person who utters them, a belief which words themselves cannot produce (Bourdieu, 1975c).

Symbolic power, a subordinate power, is a transformed - i.e. misrecognizable, transfigured, and legitimated - form of the other forms of power. A unified science of practices must supersede the choice between energy models which describe social relations as relations of force, and cybernetic models which make them relations of communication, in order to describe the transformational laws which govern the transmutation of the different forms of capital into symbolic capital. The crucial process to be studied is the work of dissimulation and transfiguration (in a word, euphemization) which makes it possible to transfigure relations of force by getting the violence they objectively contain misrecognized/recognized, so transforming them into a symbolic power, capable of producing effects without visible expenditure of energy (Bourdieu, 1970) [10].

(translation by Richard Nice)

NOTES

- 1 By the opposition he establishes between iconology and iconography (which is the exact equivalent of the opposition between phonology and phonetics), Panofsky (and that whole aspect of his work which seeks to draw out the deep structures of works of art) places himself in this tradition (Panofsky, 1955).
- 2 The neo-phenomenological tradition (Schutz, 1962; Berger, 1966), and certain forms of interactionism, accept the same presuppositions simply by omitting the question of the social conditions of the possibility of doxic experience (Husserl) of the world (particularly the social world), i.e. the experience of the social world as 'taken for granted' (as Schutz puts it).
- 3 The ideological commitments of dominant-class agents are reproduction strategies tending to strengthen belief in the legitimacy of that class's domination, both within that class and outside it.
- 4 The ideological work of specialists has the effect of making explicit and systematizing, and thus of providing the means of transforming simple practical mastery into symbolic mastery; of transmuting the unsayable into the sayable, of transgressing the boundaries of the unthinkable.

- 5 The Marxist tradition affirms the relative autonomy of ideologies and the producers of ideology but without establishing the foundations and social effects of this autonomy.
- 6 The existence of a specialised field of production is the condition for the emergence of a struggle between orthodoxy and heterodoxy, which are alike opposed to doxa, i.e. the undiscussed.
- 7 We also escape the ethnologism (visible, in particular, in the analysis of archaic thought) of treating ideologies as myths, i.e. undifferentiated products of collective labour, and so neglecting all that they owe to the characteristics of the field of production (e.g. in the Greek tradition, the esoteric re-interpretations of the mythic traditions).
- 8 Meaning, i.e. function, is revealed in the correspondence between one structure and another (ideological field and social field) or one position and another (within each of these fields) and not between one element and another. For example, internal analysis of doxosophic discourse (produced by the 'political science' specialists) shows that the most frequent rhetorical device consists in projecting two extreme positions (archaic conservatism - unrealistic revolutionism) in order to generate the mid-point of rational and reasonable equilibrium (enlightened conservatism); this structure, understood as such, corresponds to the structure of the dominant class, characterized by the opposition between an ideologically retrograde fraction, threatened with decline, and a progressive fraction (dominant-dominated), with the bureaucratic fraction having as its particular interest the general interest of the class which is opposed both to reactionary conservatism and to blind progressivism. Thus it is the ideological system as such and not this or that element of it (e.g. the affectation of stylistic neutrality in Le Monde or Flaubert's refusal of commonplaces) which can be brought into relation with the system of social relations that it expresses - like the phoneme, which has no link with a concrete referent except insofar as it functions within a system.
- 9 The symbols of power (vestments, the sceptre, etc) are simply symbolic capital objectified, and their efficacy is subject to the same conditions.
- 10 The destruction of this power of symbolic imposition based on misrecognition presupposes an awakening of consciousness of arbitrariness, i.e. the unveiling of objective truth and the annihilation of belief.

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