There are two strands in Bourdieu's sociological writings. On the one hand, Bourdieu argues for a theoretical position one might term his “practical theory” which emphasizes virtuosic interactions between individuals. On the other hand, and most frequently, Bourdieu appeals to the concept of the habitus according to which society consists of objective structures and determined—and isolated—individuals. Although Bourdieu believes that the habitus is compatible with his practical theory and overcomes the impasse of objectivism and subjectivism in social theory, neither claim is the case; the habitus is incompatible with his practical theory, and it retreats quickly into objectivism. However, Bourdieu's practical theory does offer a way out of the impasse of objectivism and subjectivism by focussing on the intersubjective interactions between individuals.

INTRODUCTION

One of the central aims of Pierre Bourdieu's writings has been to overcome the pernicious dualism between objectivism and subjectivism, exemplified in France by Levi-Strauss and Sartre, respectively (Brubaker 1985: 746; Jenkins 1993: 18). As part of a wider ‘theory of practice,’ Bourdieu has famously developed the concept of the habitus to overcome this impasse of objectivism and subjectivism. As Bourdieu writes:

These two moments the subjectivist and objectivist stand in dialectical relation. It is this dialectic of objectivity and subjectivity that the concept of the habitus is designed to capture and encapsulate. (Bourdieu 1988b: 782)

For Bourdieu, the habitus which consists of corporal dispositions and cognitive templates overcomes subject-object dualism by inscribing subjective, bodily actions with objective social force so that the most apparently subjective individual acts take on social meaning. Although Bourdieu believes that the notion of the habitus resolves the subject-object dualism of social theory, in fact, the habitus relapses against Bourdieu’s intentions into the very objectivism which he rejects. Yet, despite the failings of the habitus, Bourdieu’s contribution to the agency-structure debate cannot be dismissed for there is a second strand in Bourdieu’s writing which is in direct opposition with the habitus. Much of what Bourdieu describes under the name of “practical theory” and which he believes justifies the concept of the habitus is, in fact, quite radically incompatible with the habitus. This second strand in his writing, which emphasizes virtuosic, intersubjective social practice, offers a way out of the structure-agency problem without relapsing into either subjectivism or objectivism.

1Bourdieu has written on a wide range of subjects, which includes social theory (1977a, 1990a), ethnography (1977a, 1979), education (1977b, 1988, 1996), culture (1993), and class and consumption (1984). A small cottage industry has grown up around the various fields in which Bourdieu has worked; for instance, concerning his analysis of culture, see Fowler (1996, 1997), or for his examination of education, see Archer (1983), Gorder (1980).
In highlighting those passages in Bourdieu’s work which point to a “practical theory” that offers a way out of subject-object dualism, I want to do to Bourdieu what he seeks to do to others: to “think with a thinker against that thinker” (Bourdieu 1990b: 49). I want to think with Bourdieu’s “practical theory” against the habitus.

The existence of these two contradictory strands within Bourdieu’s writing not only provides an illuminating focus on the structure-agency debate, suggesting a way beyond this debate, but the opposing strands in Bourdieu’s writing explain the notably mixed reception of his work by commentators. On the one hand, the critics who have focused on the notion of the habitus have argued—rightly, as I intend to show—that this concept slips back into exactly the kind of objectivism Bourdieu refutes (e.g., Schatzki 1987, 1997; Bouveresse 1995; Brubaker 1985; Jenkins 1982, 1993; DiMaggio 1979; Garnham and Williams 1980; Lamont and Lareau 1988; de Certeau 1988). On the other hand, certain other commentators highlighting those passages of Bourdieu’s work which I would term his “practical theory” maintain that he has gone a long way toward overcoming the dualism of structure and agency, presenting a genuine advance in social theory (e.g., Wacquant 1987; Harker 1984; Taylor 1993). These commentators also rightly point to the progressive, “practical” element in Bourdieu’s social theory but ignore the implications of the habitus. By recognizing that there are two separable and, indeed, incompatible strands in Bourdieu’s writing, this division between his commentators becomes explicable.

In a recent paper, Evens (1999) has recognized the ambivalence at the heart of Bourdieu’s writings where Bourdieu insists that he wants to overcome the subject-object dualism but then persistently reverts into a sophisticated form of objectivism. Engaging with Bourdieu, Evens tries to point toward a non-dualistic social theory founded on intersubjective, meaningful practice. For Evens, Bourdieu is a materialist who has failed to take into account the fundamental hermeneutic insight that even the most material aspects of social life are inherently meaningful, rendered possible only by wider cultural understandings. Thus, Evens prioritizes “ethics,” by which he means this wider value-laden cultural horizon (Evens 1999: 7), above material power which is at the forefront of Bourdieu’s social theory. For Evens, “practice is more fundamentally a matter of ethics than of power” (Evens 1999: 6). Evens’ argument for a hermeneutic and intersubjective sociology against objectivist notions like the habitus is substantially echoed here. However, like most of Bourdieu’s critics, Evens sees only the objectivist side of his work, although he maintains that Bourdieu is a very sophisticated objectivist (Evens 1999: 9), and Evens fails to recognize the “practical” dimension in Bourdieu’s work that points toward the very theory which Evens proposes. Given that the overwhelming bulk of Bourdieu’s work is informed directly by the habitus and is, therefore, objectivist, this is a wholly understandable mistake, but, despite Evens’ own evident respect for Bourdieu, it does not finally do justice to Bourdieu’s work nor explain Bourdieu’s incredulity at the accusations of objectivism which have reasonably been made of his work. It is necessary to recognize these two competing, conflicting strands in Bourdieu’s work even if the “practical” dimension is the subordinate undercurrent. By recognizing this “practical theory,” Bourdieu’s writing comes to offer a

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1 It is difficult to isolate the exact passages of purely “practical theory” in Bourdieu’s writing because this “practical theory” often sits side by side with arguments for the habitus and, even as we shall see in one example, in the same sentence (e.g., Bourdieu 1990a: 12). However, the passage which proposes “practical theory” most consistently is the first fifteen pages of The Outline of a Theory of Practice, although the whole of the first chapter remains for the most part true to this position. A commitment to “practical theory” is also revealed in The Logic of Practices (1998a), Chapter 6, “The Work of Time,” though the rest of that book exemplifies Bourdieu’s confused oscillation between the objectivist habitus and “practical theory” (e.g., Chapter 3, “Structures, Habitus, Practice”).

2 Dreyfus and Rabinow (1993) have noted the tension in Bourdieu’s work and have argued that Bourdieu cannot really be taken seriously on his own terms.
genuine advance in social theory, making a substantial contribution to the resolution of the agency-structure debate.

BOURDIEU’S “PRACTICAL THEORY”

In the opening pages of the Outline, Bourdieu argues that the social scientist’s peculiar position as a (putatively) impartial observer who is an outsider to the social processes under observation has had a nefarious effect on sociology.

So long as he remains unaware of the limits inherent in his point of view on the object, the anthropologist is condemned to adopt unwittingly for his own use the representation of action which is forced on agents or groups when they lack practical mastery of a highly valued competence and have to provide themselves with an explicit and at least semi-formalized substitute for it in the form of a repertoire of rules, or of what sociologists consider, at best, as a ‘role’, i.e. a predetermined set of discourses and actions appropriate to a particular ‘stage-part’. (Bourdieu 1977a: 2)

For Bourdieu, the “objective” and external position which the social scientist adopts ensures that the social life under study is misrepresented. Since anthropologists and other social scientists are outsiders to the social realities which they are studying, they invariably construct maps, models, and rules by which they orient themselves around this strange cultural landscape. The anthropologist “compensates for lack of practical mastery by creating a cultural map” (Bourdieu 1977a: 2), but the anthropologist then takes this (static and timeless) map (only of use and interest to the outsider in the first place) as evidence for the existence of an objective system of rules which imposes itself remorselessly on social interaction. In positing the existence of inexorable rules or systems, anthropologists have not gained an insight into the way individuals actively and knowingly engage in everyday interactions with the skill of virtuosos (Bourdieu 1977a: 79), but rather have imposed their own curious and contemplative relation to that social life onto native practices. Since they as visiting intellectuals have to think of social life in terms of rules and principles (because they do not know it properly), they assume that native agents share this curious intellectualizing position. For Bourdieu, native virtuosos do not act according to precise rules and principles nor do they have a need for such rules, knowing the practices of their culture better than any set of rules could describe.

For Bourdieu, social agents are “virtuosos” (1977a: 79) who are not dominated by some abstract social principles but who know the script so well that they can elaborate and improvise upon the themes which it provides and in the light of their relations with others. Bourdieu describes social actors as having a “sense of the game,” using football and tennis players as examples of this virtuosic sense. These players do not apply a priori principles to their play—only beginners need to do that—but rather, having an intimate understanding of the object of the game and the kinds of situations it can throw up, they have the practical flexibility to know when and how they should run to the net or into space (1992: 19, 120–21; 1990b: 62; 1990a: 66–67, 81; 1988: 783). Crucially, the “sense of the game” refers ultimately to a sense of one’s relations with other individuals and what those individuals will regard as tolerable, given certain broadly shared but not definitive understand-

4 Although I cannot sustain the claim here, I would argue that, while Wittgenstein, Merleau-Ponty, and Nietzsche are important to Bourdieu’s “practical theory,” the key influence is the existential phenomenology of Martin Heidegger. There are numerous references which Bourdieu makes to Heidegger (see, for example, Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 122, 137; Bourdieu 1990b: 5) Commentators have also noted this influence (e.g., Fowler 1997: 35; Schatzki 1987: 113).
Bourdieu’s discussion of honor among the Kabyle highlights this intersubjective sense of the game (against individualistic rule-following):

The driving of the whole mechanism is not some abstract principle (principle of isotimy, equality in honor), still less the set of rules which can be derived from it but the sense of honor, a disposition inculcated in earlier years of life and constantly reinforced by calls to order from the group. (Bourdieu 1977a: 14–15, second italics added)

Kabylian men’s sense of honor is a shifting agreement established and transformed by negotiation between Kabylian men. Individuals do not solipsistically consult a priori rules which then determine their action independently, but rather individuals act according to a sense of practice which is established and judged by the group. The final determination of correct action is not whether one rigorously followed an a priori rule but rather whether one’s actions are interpreted as appropriate and proper by other individuals. Other individuals—the group—decide whether an action is acceptable or sanctionable, given their shared sense of honor; they call those individuals to order who have acted against this socially agreed sense of honor. Consequently, because appropriate action is informed by group agreement which is only a negotiated and temporary settlement, there is an openness to practice.

[I]f practices had as their principle the generative principle which has to be constructed in order to account for them, that is, a set of independent and coherent axioms, then the practices produced according to perfectly conscious generative rules would be stripped of everything that defines them as distinctively as practices, that is, the uncertainty and ‘fuzziness’ resulting from the fact that they have as their principle not a set of conscious, constant rules, but practical schemes. (Bourdieu 1990a: 12)

The term ‘fuzziness’ is significant for it refers to Wittgenstein’s critique of rules in language games. Wittgenstein argued that rules are always social and, consequently, understandable only within the context of a social practice. Illustrating this point, Wittgenstein poses and answers the rhetorical question: “What is the criterion for the way the formula is meant? It is, for example, the kind of way we always use it, the way we are taught to use it” (Wittgenstein 1974: §190). The application of rules is not determined by their intrinsic logic, as rationalist philosophers would have it, but by social agreement. Consequently, individuals may be able to justify certain actions to the group which are not, in fact, “given” by the rules but which are recognized by the group as appropriate. In this way, the commonly held sense of honor might change. However, while under “practical theory” rules do not close action down, the fact that practices have to be continually referred to the informal tribunal of the group means that individuals can certainly not do anything they like. They are constrained by other individuals. Moreover, because individuals are from birth embedded in social relations with other individuals, any action they perform is inevitably social because it is derived from their socially created sense of practice learnt from other individuals. Consequently, since they learn how to act from others (rather than being imposed upon by an objective structure as the habitus suggests), their repertoire of permitted actions is circumscribed by a particular cultural horizon. That horizon is certainly broad and “fuzzy,” but there is a limit to imaginable action within it because individuals can only decide upon courses of action learnt from or minimally derived from other indi-

5 As we shall see, this passage slips toward the very objectivism to which the notion of ‘fuzziness’ is opposed.
individuals with whom an individual has some form of relationship. Individuals can never invent a purely individualistic and asocial act—unless they are actually insane. Under practical theory, individuals are constrained by being embedded in social relations with other individuals, whose opinions decide upon and inform the legitimacy of their actions but they are not determined by rules which exist prior to social agreement.

The same emphasis on intersubjective virtuosity is highlighted in Bourdieu’s critique of structuralist accounts of gift exchange.

All experience of practice contradicts these paradoxes, and affirms that cycles of reciprocity are not the irresistible gearing of obligatory practice found only in ancient tragedy: a gift may remain unrequited, if it meets with ingratitude: it may be spurned as an insult. (Bourdieu 1977a: 9)

Rather than merely enacting an already established system of exchange by the following of rules, individuals renegotiate their relations with other individuals by manipulating common understandings about gift exchange in their favor. However, this critique of structuralist accounts of gift exchange is not only relevant because it emphasizes the virtuosity of social actors and the intersubjective nature of social life but it also reveals that practical theory undermines the notion of objective social or economic structures. When sociologists talk of objective social or economic structures, they reify the complex and negotiated exchanges over time between individuals into a static, timeless system which exists before any individuals. Supposedly objective “structures” consist only of individuals involved in negotiated exchanges with other individuals. Although it might be heuristically useful to describe a complex system of exchange as “structure,” the implication of Bourdieu’s account of gift exchange is that this so-called “structure” is only the simplified reification of complex, negotiated, and ever-changing relations between individuals, who are constantly renegotiating their relations with each other. On his practical theory, individuals are embedded in complex, constantly negotiated networks of relations with other individuals; isolated individuals do not stand before objective structures and rules which determine their actions but in networks of relations which they virtuosically manipulate.

Bourdieu’s “practical theory,” which is articulated in certain passages in his writing such as the opening pages of the Outline, has extremely important implications for contemporary structure and agency debates because it points toward a social ontology which obviates the dualism of structure and agency. In those opening pages of the Outline, Bourdieu undermines the notion of objective, determining social rules and social structure which are prior to individuals who are isolated from their social relations with other individuals and placed before these rules or structure. In place of these objective rules or

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6 The allegiance to this dualistic ontology of objective social structure or rules, on the one hand, and isolated individuals, on the other, is widespread and, indeed, is dominant in contemporary social theory. It is demonstrated in the works of Bhaskar (1979, 1986, 1991, 1993), Archer (1988, 1995), Porpora (1993), the realist tradition more widely (e.g., Sayer, 1992), Giddens (1984, 1988), and a host of other figures such as Layder (1981) and Mouzelis (1995). Giddens is interesting here in that his structuration theory is marked by the same tension as Bourdieu’s writing where he recognizes the intersubjective nature of social life but overlays this interactive ontology—expressed in the concept of “practical consciousness”—with a dualistic one, expressed by his concept of “structure.” For a longer discussion and critique of the dualistic ontologies of these theorists—and particularly their solipsistic foundations—see King 1998a, 1998b, 2000. Significantly, even though Habermas has importantly emphasized the solipsistic basis of much Western philosophy and cogently argued for the need to recognize the centrality of social interaction in any serious philosophy (e.g., Habermas 1987a), he himself slips towards this kind of dualistic ontology of objective structure and isolated individual in The Theory of Communicative Action (1987b) where he opposes the “life world” to the “system.” The dominance of this dualistic ontology in contemporary social theory today renders Bourdieu’s “practical theory” important because it, along with other hermeneutic or Wittgensteinian theorists such as Gadamer (1975), Winch (1977) and Taylor (1995), offers a route out of the theoretical difficulties which arise out of this dualism of agent and structure.
structures which are imposed upon isolated individuals, Bourdieu’s “practical theory” highlights the mutual negotiation of social relations between individuals. Social life does not consist of a synchronic map or system which imposes itself upon the individual but only of practical and negotiated interactions between individuals. By replacing structure and agency with interacting, social individuals, Bourdieu has overcome many of the dualisms of conventional social theory. On this “practical theory,” there is no longer the individual and society, the subject and the object, but only individuals interacting with other individuals. However, even in proposing this “practical theory,” which emphasizes intersubjective virtuosity within the context of wider networks of individuals, Bourdieu, apparently unknowingly, slips away from its ontological implications toward the very objectivism which he sought to refute; even in the midst of “practical theory,” he still held onto notions of a priori, deterministic structures on which individuals drew solipsistically. Never fully banishing those concepts from his writing, Bourdieu allowed them to gain dominance over his thinking. The concept of the habitus constitutes the moment of regression into objectivism and, therefore, back into the very dualism of structure and agency which Bourdieu had already substantially superseded.

THE HABITUS

With his “practical theory,” Bourdieu overcomes the impasse of objectivism and subjectivism or structure and agency by highlighting the virtuosic and indeterminate interactions between mutually susceptible and constraining individuals. However, from this initial statement of “practical theory” he introduces the concept of the habitus which he believes follows from what he has initially argued but which, in fact, operates with a quite different, objectivist idea of social reality. The central reason for Bourdieu’s unwitting reversion to objectivism is that he never fully renounced claims to certain objective features of social life in the way that his “practical theory” implied. This residue of objectivism becomes particularly apparent in The Logic of Practices where objectivist claims remain unchallenged, even though they are logically incompatible with the ontology of Bourdieu’s “practical theory.” Thus, in defining what he considers to be a theory of practice, Bourdieu insists that:

[O]ne has to return to practice, the site of the dialectic of opus operatum and modus operandi; of objectified products and incorporated products of historical practice: of structures and habitus (Bourdieu 1990a: 52)

By opus operatum, which strictly means “the work which has been done” but which is traditionally used to refer to the divinely created universe, Bourdieu refers to those objective and prior cultural and structural features of a society (which, like the universe, are beyond humans) while the modus operandi—the mode of operating—refers to the practical strategies which individuals adopt. Thus, although Bourdieu originally emphasizes the practical and intersubjective nature of social life, arguing (especially in his critique of the gift) against the assumption of an autonomous system or set of social rules (an opus operatum, in effect), here he makes a rather different claim. Society no longer consists only of interactions between individuals, but rather Bourdieu sees society as a dialectic between practice and structure. Despite the implications and explicit claims of “practical theory,” Bourdieu never in the end sustains that challenge to objectivism and the concept of structure but only says that we need to think about practice as well as structure. We need to emphasize practice and its relation to structure rather than radically undermine structure by considering the implications of the practical and intersubjective nature of social reality.
As we have seen, Bourdieu’s initial emphasis on the intersubjective practice between individuals renders appeals to structure as the untenable and unnecessary errors of intellectualizing and individualizing sociologists. Yet, here he reinstates structure, and the radical implications of his initial espousal of intersubjective practice are lost. Bourdieu’s theoretical pusillanimity, when he fails to take the implications of his “practical theory” seriously, marks his retreat to objectivism, and the habitus becomes the key vehicle for that retreat.

Announcing that surrender to objectivism, Bourdieu defines the habitus in the following way:

The conditionings associated with a particular class of conditions of existence produce the habitus, systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organize practices and representation. (Bourdieu 1990a: p.53; also 1977: 78, 84,85)

The habitus comprises perceptual structures and embodied dispositions which organize the way individuals see the world and act in it; “the cognitive structures which social agents implement in their practical knowledge of the social world are internalized, embodied social structures” (Bourdieu 1984: 468). Crucially, this habitus is derived directly from the socioeconomic or structural position in which individuals find themselves. Thus, individuals unconsciously internalize their objective social conditions, such as their economic class, so that they have the appropriate tastes and perform the appropriate practices for that social position:

[T]he principle division into logical classes which organizes the perception of the social world is itself the product of the internalization of the division of social classes.

(Bourdieu 1984: 170)

Bourdieu argues that individuals demonstrate an “amor fati” (a love of destiny) (Bourdieu 1984: 244) wherein they automatically fulfil the appropriate role for their objective situation. Individuals automatically live out an objective social destiny as a result of the habitus. Not only does Bourdieu emphasize the existence of objective economic and conceptual structures (the habitus), but the interactional, intersubjective element of social life which was central to his “practical theory” is effaced by a solipsistic theory where the lone individual is now attached to an objective social structure. There are no “calls to order by the group” nor any subtle consideration of the reactions of others when Bourdieu discusses the habitus, nor does there need to be, for the habitus ensures that the individual will inevitably act according to the logic of the situation. The origin of individuals’ actions lies not in their interaction with other individuals but in the objective structures which confront them. It is to those structures, the opus operatum, not others, to whom they must now defer.

Significantly, Bourdieu argues that the tastes which the habitus produces and the kinds of social practices which it determines are deeply inscribed in the very bodies of individ-

7 Commentators have also defined the habitus in this way (e.g. Garnham 1986: 425; Jenkins 1993: 81; Schatzki 1987: 133).
8 In fact, as Schatzki has noted, Bourdieu claims that there is a direct linkage of taste to economic conditions which Schatzki rightly criticizes as a category error (1987: 131–2). Bourdieu has defended his notion of the habitus (1992: 140) by asking critics to analyze not his theoretical definition of it but his use of it, for instance, in the 500-page work, The State Nobility (1996b). On my reading, that work in no way obviates the criticisms made here or by other critics.
uals. Thus, Bourdieu describes the way in which the tastes imposed by our class are not primarily intellectual properties but are embodied by us so that we have an instinctive bodily reaction against those things which do not fit our habituses (Bourdieu 1984: 486, 478). Bourdieu, for instance, describes the bowed deportment of Kabylia women which denotes physically and symbolically their political subordination in that society (Bourdieu 1979). Bourdieu’s emphasis on the body is a useful antidote to the intellectualist emphasis of much social theory, and his discussion of the physical manifestations of taste and of the symbolism of the body in social practice seems both accurate and highly illuminating. It is true that the way we conduct ourselves corporally is central to social life and that, in fact, successful bodily conduct has to become second nature to be successful. We have to act “naturally” to be taken seriously as social actors. However, although Bourdieu is correct to highlight the centrality of the body to social life, his account of how the society inscribes itself on the human body is objectivist and determinist. The habitus, which is determined by the social conditions in which an individual lives, imposes certain forms of practice and conduct on the bodies of individuals, who in the end unknowingly embody the “structuring structure” of the habitus.

This unconscious embodiment of social structure by means of the habitus is revealed in various passages.

Each agent, wittingly or unwittingly, willy nilly, is a producer and reproducer of objective meaning. Because his actions and works are the product of a *modus operandi* of which he is not the producer and has no conscious mastery, they contain an “objective intention,” as the Scholastics put it, which always outruns his conscious intentions . . . It is because subjects, strictly speaking, do not know what they are doing that what they do has more meaning than they know. (Bourdieu 1977: 79)

It is notable that, in this passage, it is not simply that individuals have no control over the objective social and cultural structures which confront them, the *opus operatum*, but they now also have “no conscious mastery” over even their *modus operandi*, their individual social strategies. In arguing that individuals are dominated by objective social realities, Bourdieu strikingly reneges on the claims which he made in his discussion in the opening pages of the *Outline* where he explicitly rejected the reduction of social life to “a repertoire of rules” or a “role” with “a predetermined set of discourses and actions appropriate to a particular ‘stage-part’” (Bourdieu 1977a: 2). This slide from his “practical theory,” emphasizing intersubjective virtuosity, into an objectivist social theory is nowhere more clearly demonstrated than in a sentence from the *Logic of Practices* already cited above (Bourdieu 1990a: 8). Having claimed that practices are “fuzzy” because they are not determined by *a priori* rules but by intersubjective renegotiation, he writes in the final clause of this sentence that practices “have as their principle not a set of conscious, constant rules, but practical schemes, opaque to their possessors, varying according to the logic of the situation” (Bourdieu 1990a: 12). So keen is he to avoid a rationalist account of rule-following, where the rules determine action by force of logic, he asserts that social practices are in fact governed by unknown, opaque rules which social agents apply without thinking and without really knowing. In direct contradiction with his “practical theory,” he is not claiming that individuals know a practice so well that they do not need rules or that rules are only in the end loose descriptions of practices to which they are inadequate but that the rules or schemas which determine practice and which are physically embodied are now

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9 See Evens 1999, 15–16.
unknown to social agents. Such a formulation compounds the intellectualist error because objective rules are still seen to determine social life but these rules are now not even known to the individuals who putatively follow them.

In arguing for the habitus, it is not just that Bourdieu reneges upon his commitment to the virtuosity of individual actors, which was one of the central elements of his “practical theory.” In addition, he renounces the ontological implications of his “practical theory” implicit in his discussion of gift exchange, which implied that society consisted only of the complex interactions between individuals. Bourdieu returns instead to a dualistic social ontology of objective structure and subordinated individual.

The habitus is the product of the work of inculcation and appropriation necessary in order for those products of collective history, the objective structures (e.g. of language, economy, etc.) to succeed in reproducing themselves more or less completely, in the form of durable dispositions, in organisms (which one can, if one wishes, call individuals) lastingly subjected to the same conditions of existence. (Bourdieu 1977: 85).

The virtuoso (now only an organism) is reduced to a cultural dope while collective history, language, and the economy are given objective status and agency. The “products of collective history” now reproduce themselves by imposing a habitus upon unknowing individuals. Such an objectivist and dualistic vision is incompatible with Bourdieu’s critique of structuralist accounts of gift exchange where he demonstrated that systems of gift exchange are not things which have existence or agency in themselves but are only complex networks of interactions between individuals over time. The products of collective history, language, and the economy do not reproduce themselves. Rather, individuals maintain and transform their mutually constraining relations with other individuals, and to argue otherwise is to fall into the very forms of intellectualizing reification which Bourdieu initially rejected.

In fact, when Bourdieu connects the habitus to the “field,” by which he means the objective structure of unequal positions which accumulate around any form of practice, the flexibility which Bourdieu intends to be present in the concept of the habitus—but which in fact is ruled out by the concept—appears. The notion of habitus begins to lose its rigidity. Individuals begin to transform their habitus strategically, given their relations with others, in order to establish their distinction from other groups and individuals in the field. Thus, in the field of consumption and class, Bourdieu describes how the upper classes have to adopt new fashions in the light of the diffusion of their tastes among subordinate classes (Bourdieu 1984: 160–65). The connection of the habitus to the field, which allows for a degree of intersubjective struggle and change, provides a richer and more convincing account of social life which is much closer to “practical theory.” However, even by connecting the habitus to the field Bourdieu has not rid the habitus of its problems. His incorporation of the habitus into struggles around the field and its openness to change in these struggles is at odds with his formal definition of the habitus. Strictly, he cannot allow individuals the choices or strategies which he gives them when he discusses the field because any choice individuals can make are always already given by the habitus which is itself determined by their objective, prior and, therefore, unchangeable position in the field. If he is serious about the openness of the habitus to transformation, then he must reformulate the habitus, rejecting the definitions cited above, and return to notions like “the sense of the game” which featured in his practical theory and which emphasized intersubjective negotiation. Moreover, the concept of the field is not without its difficulties.
for it refers to objective structures of power and material inequality and, therefore, formally rules out the flexibility which the passages in which it is employed suggest. Bourdieu argues that “to think in terms to a field is to think relationally” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 96) but not relationally in the sense suggested by Bourdieu’s practical theory.

What exist in the social world are relations—not interactions between agents and intersubjective ties between individuals but objective relations which exist “independent of individual consciousness and will,” as Marx says. . . . In analytic terms a field may be defined as a network, or a configuration of objective relation between positions. (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 97)

The field’s conception of these inequalities as objective, prior economic realities before any individual action or consciousness cannot be sustained for it suggests in Durkheimian fashion that society has some independent and metaphysical existence independently of individuals. Consequently, although when connected to the field the habitus suggests a richer account of social life because it highlights the struggle inherent in social life, both concepts fail to provide an adequate sociology because they transform the interactions between individuals into objective, systemic properties which are prior to individuals. Once society has been turned into an objective rather than intersubjective reality by the use of concepts like the habitus or field, individual agency and intersubjective negotiation and struggle are necessarily curtailed, even though that may not be the intention of the theorist.

Even so, Bourdieu genuinely believes that the habitus overcomes the problem of subject-object dualism in social theory and that the habitus is consistent with his wider theory of practice which highlights individuals’ virtuosity and the mutability of intersubjective social relations. For instance, when questioned by Loic Wacquant about the criticisms made about the determinism of his habitus, Bourdieu has simply denied this determinism.

LW: You thus reject the deterministic schema sometimes attributed to you with the formula “structures produce habitus, which determine practices, which produce structures;” (Bidet 1979; Jenkins 1982; Gorder 1980; Giroux 1982) that is, the idea that position in structure directly determines social strategy.

Circular and mechanical models of this kind are precisely what the notion of habitus is designed to help us destroy. (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 134)

Bourdieu sees the habitus as allowing room for slippage so that it mediates between the opus operatum of structure and the modus operandi of practice, heavily constraining social action but not definitively determining it. Bourdieu is right to insist that he meant to give the habitus this flexibility as it would be untenable to argue that social life is completely determined—and against the implications of much of what he says. Yet, despite Bourdieu’s claims of how the habitus is meant to operate, the definition which Bourdieu gives the habitus prevents it from doing anything other than effacing the virtuosity of social actors and the intersubjective nature of social reality. If we read Bourdieu strictly, the habitus marks the moment when Bourdieu collapses back into the very sociological objectivism which he putatively rejected, returning once again to the dualistic social ontology of the isolated individual, on the one hand, and objective structure, on the other. However, since there is a second strand in Bourdieu’s writing, his “practical theory,” it is possible to reconstruct what Bourdieu really intended. It is possible to extract a social theory from his work which genuinely avoids “the circular and mechanical models” of objectivist sociology.
THE CRITIQUE OF THE HABITUS

A. The Habitus and Social Change

The disjunction between the habitus and practical theory in Bourdieu’s writings and the sociological superiority of practical theory over the habitus is graphically demonstrated by the problem of social change as various critics have noted (e.g., Garnham and Williams 1980: 222; Gorder 1980: 344; Swartz 1977: 554, Wacquant 1987: 81, Brubaker 1985: 759). The problem, as these critics have argued, is this: If the habitus were determined by objective conditions, ensuring appropriate action for the social position in which any individual was situated, and the habitus were unconsciously internalized dispositions and categories, then social change would be impossible. Individuals would act according to the objective structural conditions in which they found themselves, and they would consequently simply reproduce those objective conditions by repeating the same practices. Despite Bourdieu’s claim that the habitus enables “agents to cope with unforeseen and ever-changing situations” (Bourdieu 1977: 72), if his definition of the habitus is taken at its word, then these new situations could never arise nor could the habitus allow any transformation in practice. Social practices would be determined by a priori dispositions, embodied unknowingly by social agents, and consequently, their flexibility and creativity in the face of changing situations would be curtailed. Since the habitus imposes itself upon “willy nilly,” they can never construct new strategies for new situations because they are not aware of their habituses and, therefore, cannot begin to reinterpret them. Moreover, since everyone in society has a habitus, individuals will never actually be faced with unforeseen and ever-changing situations, because everyone else, informed by their habitus, would simply go on repeating their social practices and reproducing their social relations. Thus, the habitus rules out the possibility of social change. Significantly, the habitus formally rules out any external intervention which has always been a key motor for social transformation because individuals in other societies, operating under their own habituses, will be similarly constrained in their activities and will not seek out new contacts with other groups. Clearly, such rigidity, which is entirely at odds with Bourdieu’s intentions, is untenable, but this reductio ad absurdum is formally implicit in the habitus, demonstrating the serious limitations of this concept.

In order to circumvent the formal immutability of the habitus, Bourdieu has to construct a theory of social change for the habitus, and, in doing so, he moves unwittingly back to his practical theory. In order to allow for the mutability which is manifest in social life, Bourdieu develops the notion of the hysteresis effect (Bourdieu 1984: 142; 1996: 157; 1990a: 59). The hysteresis effect refers to the physical phenomenon whereby there is lag time between the actual reversal of a magnet’s poles and the point when that reversal begins to take effect, the different ends of the magnet now repelling north or south where once they attracted those poles. In relation to the habitus and social change, the hysteresis effect occurs when the habitus lags behind the objective material conditions which gave rise to it and with which the habitus has to catch up. The most striking example of the hysteresis effect in Bourdieu’s writing is *Homo Academicus* (1996a) where establishment academics in the late 1960s were still operating with a habitus which was anachronistic to the changing realities in higher education. Bourdieu summarizes this situation in a later work:

The categories of perception that agents apply to the social world are the product of a prior state of this world. When structures are modified, even slightly, the structural

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10Harker (1984) thinks the habitus is capable of explaining change by means of a notion of “slippage”; for “slippage” read “hysteresis,” to which the following criticisms of the hysteresis effect apply.
hysteresis of the categories of perception and appreciation gives rise to diverse forms of allodoxia. Classificatory schemata originating in common perception of the former state of the education system, such as the distinction between humanities and science students or between the grand écoles and the universities, lead to representations of present reality that do not account for new realities. (Bourdieu 1996b: 219)

As objective structures change, new habituses arise to fit in with the emergent reality. In arguing for a hysteresis effect, we can clearly see what Bourdieu is saying, and we also see that it is not entirely ridiculous. Reactionary individuals and groups do maintain ideas and values which are outmoded and in conflict with the emergent social realities while progressive groups successfully articulate the direction of change.

However, although we might loosely concur with Bourdieu that, at particular historical moments, certain groups operate with a set of understandings which are anachronistic to emerging realities, the hysteresis effect does not resolve the problem of social change for the habitus but merely sidesteps it. The hysteresis effect assumes that the transformation of the objective social structure will occur in some unspecified way which will leave the habitus lagging behind these changes. Eventually, according to the hysteresis effect, the habitus catches up with the changes to these objective conditions. Yet, as I have suggested, the whole problem of the habitus is that it blocks any social change which Bourdieu subsequently assumes. If every individual is constrained by his habitus, then the objective conditions will simply be reproduced (by the habitus) and no social change will take place. There can never be any hysteresis effect because the habitus prevents any individuals from introducing into the social structure new practices which might cause other habituses to lag behind new social realities. Furthermore, even if we assume that the hysteresis effect could occur and changes could happen independently of the habitus, any change to the habitus would require knowing active individuals who would creatively rethink the principles of their actions. Consequently, at some point, in order to account for change, the objective status of the habitus would have to be rejected and we would have to concede that the habitus did not impose upon individuals “willy nilly,” but that individuals have intimate knowledge of their culture. The habitus requires a “practical theory” of interacting virtuosic individuals which it effaces with its talk of objectivity and individuals’ love of their social destinies.

While the habitus is inadequate to the explanation of social change and, in fact, presupposes the kind of interpretive virtuosity of “practical theory,” social change is intrinsic to Bourdieu’s “practical theory.” Bourdieu’s “practical theory” insists social reality consists of the negotiation of social relations between individuals and can never be reduced to a static and timeless model. These relations can only be maintained by exchange. Thus, even if individuals are not explicitly seeking to renegotiate their relations (as they often are), each subsequent exchange builds on the entire series of exchanges and, thereby, subtly transforms the meaning of those past exchanges and, therefore, the relationship itself. Social relations can never be static for their mere maintenance requires further agency, which necessarily involves a transformation of the relationship. Furthermore, as we have noted, these social relations are not determined by some transcendental rule but informed by broad cultural understandings, such as the Kabylian sense of honor, which are established in calls to order by the group. Since these understandings are publicly held ideas, they are fully open to renegotiation. Consequently, as Kabylian virtuosos develop

11 Evens makes a similar argument that the material factors which Bourdieu takes as objective in fact presuppose values of which individuals are aware (Evens 1999: 28–29). For Evens, the habitus also presupposes knowing individuals.
new social relations and practices in their relations with each other, public discussion of
the sense of the honor can transform the notion of honor in Kabyle society so that it comes
to define a set of practices as honorable which might have previously been regarded as
dishonorable. Since, on Bourdieu’s “practical theory,” social relations and the cultural
understandings which inform those relations exist only insofar as individuals recreate and
agree upon them in their interactions with each other, social change is intrinsic to Bour-
dieu’s “practical theory” where it is an embarrassment to the habitus.

B. The Reductiveness of the Habitus

Although the habitus fails to provide an explanation of social change, its great strength
seems to lie, as certain commentators have suggested (Collins 1989: 463; Wacquant 1987:
81), in the fact that it does provide a convincing account of social reproduction. In fact, the
habitus is inadequate even to this task for it only explains social reproduction by casting a
shroud of deadening objectivism over living interactions between virtuosic individuals. Its
account of social reproduction is a parody of the actual process by which social relations
are sustained. In place of the complex renegotiation of relations between individuals, which
always leaves room for transformation, the habitus reduces social reproduction to the
mechanical imposition of prior social structure onto the practices of individuals, returning
to the very systemic image of social life which Bourdieu initially rejected in his critique of
structuralist accounts of gift exchange. Ironically, the reductiveness of the habitus becomes
clearest in Bourdieu’s own writings.

In a celebrated early essay, Bourdieu describes how the practical sense of honor informs
the action of virtuoso social performers (1979). Bourdieu discusses the case of a well-
known man of honor whose newly built wall is stolen by an individual in Kabyle society
who is recognized to have no honor, an amahbul (1979: 95–6). The man of honor rebuilds
the wall at his own cost and then complains to the brother of the amahbul. The brother of
the amahbul assumes that the honorable man both wants him to complain to the amahbul
and arrange compensation from the amahbul. At the mere prospect of compensation from
the amahbul, the man of honor flies off the handle, insisting that he wants nothing of the
sort, he just wants the brother to let amahbul know he has done wrong (1979: 97). The
man of honor, whose wall has been broken down, cannot be seen to come into confronta-
tion with an amahbul—or worse, to accept compensation from him—for that would be
implying that the honorable man was of equal status with the amahbul. His honor would be
irreparably impugned, consequently. However, although the man of honor cannot accept
any compensation or, indeed, any relationship with the amahbul, through the latter’s brother,
he does want to exert informal and, more importantly, invisible pressure on the dishonor-
able man to bring him into line.

The subtlety of this honorable man’s actions following the demolition of his wall is
not given by a set of rules derived from any principle of honor which the man consults.
The “reproduction” of his honorable social position does not in any way follow on from
the implementation of rigid social rules, embodied in a habitus. This man constructs a
sequence of actions, given the fact that he is a man of honor dealing with a dishonorable
man, whereby he seeks to make the best of a bad situation. No rule or set of rules could
possibly legislate for all the myriad of contingencies that might occur (as a result of the
virtuosic acts of other individuals, such as the amahbul), and the Kabyle themselves

12 In fact, Bourdieu argues that the man of honor flies off the handle because the brother of the amahbul betrays
the principle of family solidarity (1979: 97). I disagree with this interpretation and by arguing for the incident in
the way I do, everything becomes explicable in terms of the man’s attempt to preserve his honor without extra-
aneous appeals to other cultural understandings such as family solidarity.
have no need of such a definitive rule. Honorable practices are not determined by reference to a rule but by reference to the opinions of those honorable Kabylian men who look to past practice and to the individual's standing to determine whether a course of action was honorable. The very difficulty for the man of honor is that it is an extraordinary and abnormal occurrence. He has to invent his own strategy (not given by rules) in order to effect some (invisible) sanction on the amahbul without the loss of face among his peers. Given his position and his understanding of honor in Kabyle society, the man of honor develops a novel strategy derived from his own self-understanding and his anticipation of how others will perceive this course of action. His sense of honor suggests this course of action to him, but unlike the habitus which imposes actions and categories on the individual, the man of honor could have adopted very different courses of action. He could have written off the wall completely, concluding that talking even with the brother of the amahbul was dishonorable. Alternatively, he could have been so certain of his own honor that he could have reclaimed his wall from the amahbul as if that man did not exist and, perhaps, even physically assaulted the amahbul in retaliation; since the amahbul does not deserve the respect due to men of honor, he could have been beaten like a dog.

Significantly, the man of honor could have created a strategy for himself which had disastrous results because it was viewed as inappropriate and dishonorable by other Kabylian men. Such disasters are logically ruled out by the objective habitus which insists on a complete fit between the individual's practices and his objective circumstances and, therefore, reduces social reproduction to an inevitability. For instance, the unwillingness of the man of honor to confront the amahbul physically and simply reappropriate the wall (treating the amahbul with the dishonor he deserved) might have been taken by other men in Kabyle society as a sign of weakness and, therefore, of dishonor. It is conceivable that the man of honor's strategy might be wrong, given its interpretation by other Kabylian men. The habitus which determines action directly, leaves no room for error, mistake, or conscious enfringement for, under its cold survey, individuals become like numbers in a mathematical equation in which there can, logically, only be one answer. In social life, mistakes can happen; strategies can go wrong. We can misjudge the sense of the game established loosely and openly in calls to order from the group. The appropriateness of our practices—and of the Kabylian man of honor's strategies—is determined not by their concurrence with some a priori rule but rather by whether other individuals see it as socially appropriate and in line with communal notions of social order and legitimacy. It is this wider public understanding which determines the acceptability of an action rather than any rule itself. Since social reality consists only of interacting virtuosos, there is never any original or pristine social order to be reproduced. Moreover, the simplistic social reproduction which the habitus envisions, where objective conditions are directly replicated, never occurs since virtuosos are continually renegotiating and, therefore, subtly altering their social relations. The maintenance of broad social stability, where social conditions remain reasonably similar—though always slowly changing—for significant periods, is actually the complex result of the interactions of skilful individuals.

CONCLUSION: BEYOND AGENCY AND STRUCTURE

Bourdieu's sociology is an attempt to overcome the impasse of objectivism and subjectivism in social theory by explaining social life without resort either to facile (Sartrean) voluntarism or to deterministic (Levi-Straussian) structuralism. Throughout his writings, Bourdieu has attempted to show how wider social reality is implicated in apparently subjective, individual thoughts and practices. This is an important project, which Bourdieu successfully
achieves in those parts of his writing that I have termed his “practical theory.” This “practical theory” overcomes the impasse of objectivism and subjectivism because it recognizes that appeals to the existence of objective social structure or culture are reifications of particular moments in the social process which consists, in fact, of individuals interacting meaningfully with other individuals. On this “practical theory,” social life is the mutually negotiated network of interactions and practices between individuals which is always necessarily open to strategic transformation. However, the dissolution of objective structure into complex figurations of practices between individuals does not involve a retreat into subjectivism.13 On the contrary, all individual practice and the understandings which inform that practice are always social; they are always learnt from others and performed in reference to others, requiring the understanding of other individuals, even if a particular individual might reject and ignore that interpretation. Thus, the amahbul may ignore what Kabylian men think of him but Kabylians’ interpretation of him as lacking honor has a severe effect on his social life. The intersubjective social context in which we are always already thrown constrains our practices and ensures that any practice we perform is social—it is always derived from shared understandings—but that context does not determine exactly what we will do or exactly what it is appropriate to do under any circumstance. We can never perform a pristine, individual act (as Sartre’s existentialism wrongly demands), but there is always indeterminacy in the relations between individuals, which allows for intersubjectively meaningful but creative social action. The supersession of the impasse of objectivism and subjectivism, of agency and structure, lies along the practical, interactional path to which, at certain moments, Bourdieu lucidly points. Unfortunately, for the greater part of his impressive oeuvre, Bourdieu has failed to take his own greatest insight seriously, and he has slipped into the very objectivism whose poverty he has done so much to highlight.

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13 Although Bourdieu believes that the phenomenological and hermeneutic traditions are subjectivist (e.g., Bourdieu 1977: Ch.2; 1990a: 25–26, 135, 140; 1990b: 125), in fact, his “practical theory” offers a very similar account of social life offered by prominent figures in the interpretive tradition. Thus, although I cannot expand upon the claim here, I would argue those social theories which have been influenced by Heidegger and Wittgenstein and, above all, the hermeneutic philosophy of Winch (1977), Gadamer (1975) and Charles Taylor (1995) (and also Elias’ figurational sociology, 1978), are compatible with Bourdieu’s “practical theory” since they ground social life in the meaningful interaction between individuals and reject appeals to objective structure.


