

# BOURDIEU – HABITUS, SYMBOLIC VIOLENCE, THE GIFT: “YOU GIVE ME / I GIVE YOU” PRINCIPLE

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**Abstract:** *In this paper, my aim is to give an outline of Bourdieu's sociological theories, of his unitary representation of social science, annihilating the disciplinary borderlines between sociology and anthropology. It is not only about the proposal of a new epistemological basis to the Durkheimian tradition, but also the conceptual and methodological apparatus necessary to such an approach. The critique of the perspectives (he inspired from originally) represented by the structuralist objectivism (Claude Levi-Strauss) and existential subjectivism (Jean-Paul Sartre) constitutes the “strategic” movement of analysis or overcoming of the dominant positions in the French space. Further I point out the implications of applying the idea of gift exchange mechanism, in class-differentiated societies, their affective effects (gratitude, love, admiration). In the hypothesis centred on the gift exchange, an agent sacrifices its profit for a long-term binding relationship. The idea is to aim at a larger profit through alliances that are formed as an effect of gift exchange. All this are shown briefly by explaining the key concepts that Bourdieu uses in the sources cited.*

*The concept of symbolic capital is constructed starting from the analysis of the “sense of honour” in the Kabyle society. Hereupon, Bourdieu resumes a central theme of anthropology: the gift exchange (gift/counter gift) addressed to the famous study by Marcel Mauss. He highlighted the strategic dimension, dissimulation of price calculation and time frame between giving and receiving. The concept of habitus has had a long tradition in the philosophical thinking. This Latin term is used as different from the word habitude. It represents the “system of dispositions”, “structuring structure”, namely a predisposition, tendency, propensity, inclination.*

**Keywords:** *habitus, symbolic violence, gift, I give you-you give me, symbolic capital, symbolic domination, field.*

Felix Pierre Bourdieu was a French sociologist whose work used methods from a wide range of disciplines, from philosophy and literary theory to sociology and anthropology. The most important aspects of

Bourdieu's theory concern the development of methodologies, combining theory and empirical data that attempt to solve some of the most difficult problems of theory and research in an attempt to reconcile the difficulties, such as how to understand the subject within objective structures. His work stressed the role of practice and its incorporation into social dynamic. Bourdieu was a passionate political activist and a strong opponent to modern forms of globalization. He saw sociology as a weapon against social oppression and injustice, to the extent to which it is used to protect against symbolic domination and the imposition of thought distortion categories. In this way, Bourdieu used the intellect weapon to discover unknown mechanisms, which remain separate and unequal various social groups in their struggle for a better world for all.

His work emphasized the role of practice and incorporation or forms, and social dynamics in shaping the vision of the world, often in opposition to universalized Western philosophical traditions. He used the theories of philosophers Ludwig Wittgenstein Ludwig and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. From Marcel Mauss and Claude Levi-Strauss, Bourdieu inherited a particular structuralist interpretation of the social structures' tendency to replicate, based on the symbolic structures analysis and classification forms. However, Bourdieu separated critically from durkheimian analyss, highlighting the role of *social agents* in the application of symbolic order, by incorporating social structures. He stressed that, in addition, the reproduction of social structures not operating according to a functionalist logic.

The debate on the primacy of structure and agency on human thought and behaviour is one of the central issues in sociology and other social sciences. In this context, "Agency" refers to a person's ability to act independently and make their own free choices. Bourdieu's work is built on trying to transcend a series of oppositions that characterized the social sciences (subjectivism / objectivism, micro / macro, freedom / determinism). In particular, he made that through conceptual innovations. The concepts of habitus, capital, and field have been created, indeed, to eliminate such oppositions.

Bourdieu, in general, tried to connect his theoretical ideas to empirical research activity, based on everyday life, and his work can be considered sociology of culture or, as he himself labelled it, "a theory of practice." For Bourdieu, each individual occupies a position in a multidimensional social space; he or she is defined not only by social class, but by any kind of capital that can be articulated through social relations. This capital

includes the value of social networks, which Bourdieu showed they could be used to produce or reproduce inequality. The social field can become more complex and autonomous, while the individual develops a typical habitus for his/her position within the social space. In doing so, social agents will often confirm, legitimate and reproduce the social forms of domination (including prejudices), and the common views of each field as taken for granted - at the level of consciousness and practice - even the confirmation of other possible inputs (including, of course, symbolic production) and power relations. Although it is not deterministic, the inculcation of subjective structures of habitus can be observed by evidence, for example, while its selective affinity with objective structures of social world justify the continuity of social order over time. Since individual habitus is always a mixture of several commitments in a person's social life, and the social field is put into practice by individuals' action, no social order or field may be completely stable. In other words, if the relationship between individual predisposition and social structure is much stronger than the one usually considered, it means that there is an no perfect match

What Bourdieu called *symbolic violence* is the self-interested ability to ensure that social order arbitrariness is either ignored or considered natural, thus justifying the legitimacy of existing social structures. This concept plays an essential role in the sociological analysis. Bourdieu developed a theory of action around the concept of habitus, which has exerted a considerable influence in social sciences. This theory seeks to demonstrate that social agents create strategies tailored to the needs of the social world in which they live. The basic concepts of this theory are shown hereafter.

### *The concept of habitus*

Trying to recover the intellectual parentage of the habitus idea led to the conclusion that it has its roots in the structural anthropology of Claude Levi-Strauss and in the development psychology of Jean Piaget, particularly the latter's generalization of the operations concept in mathematics to the study of practical knowledge, bodily intermediated. Habitus is a complex concept, but in its simplest use it would be understood as a structure characterized as a mind structure characterized by acquired schemes, sensitivities, dispositions and taste. The particular contents of habitus is the result of objectifying social structure at individual subjectivity level. He introduced the concept of symbolic

violence, to explain the silent modes, almost unconscious, of cultural / social domination occurring in the daily social habits, maintained over the conscious subjects in order to reveal the dynamics of power relations in social life.

Firstly, the habitus appears to be a useful way to conceptualize action and capacity to transform social structure. Thus, one of Bourdieu's major contributions to social theory is the fact that he developed a new radical form of cognitive sociology, along with an innovative variety of multilevel sociological explanation, which is evidenced by the interaction of different structural orders.

Secondly, habitus is an important theoretical object that protects extent Bourdieu's theory from becoming a purely rationalist formalism positional strategies employed by agents of various types of capital accumulation and allows analysis of the social agent as a player under constraints developmental, cognitive and emotional, affected by actual configurations, physical and institutional field.

Thirdly, a return of habitus to the intellectual origins allows us to appreciate Bourdieu's development of a new sociological analysis style, one deemed to be a cognitive creative sociology that takes seriously the historic development of the perception, classification and action schemes that are responsible for social reproduction at macrostructure level and for change. The use of this cognitive approach to sociological analysis can be demonstrated with examples from his work on aesthetic perception and appreciation and anthropology with application to the Kabyle society. The constituent structures of a particular type of environment produce habitus, systems of sustainable, transposable dispositions, structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, as principles of generation and structuring of practices and representations. The practices produced by habitus represent a principle that is generator of strategies, enabling agents to cope with contingencies and ever changing situations.

Habitus was inspired by the idea of "body techniques" and Marcel Mauss's *hexis*. The word itself can be found in the works of Aristotle, Norbert Elias, Max Weber, Edmund Husserl and Erwin Panofsky. For Bourdieu, habitus was essential to address prominent antinomies of the human sciences: *objectivism and subjectivism*. Habitus, defined as a system of dispositions (with duration, acquired schemes of perception, thought and action), the individual agents develop these dispositions in response to objective conditions they encounter. In this way, Bourdieu argued that objective social structure absorption into a set of dispositions of a

personal, cognitive and somatic nature, and that subjective structures of action of the agents are then proportioned to existing objective structures and requirements of the social field, create a doxic relationship. Habitus is somewhat reminiscent of earlier sociological concepts, such as socialization, but different from more classic concepts in several important ways. First of all, a central aspect of habitus is its incorporation: it does not work only at the explicit discursive level of consciousness. According to Bourdieu, it represents "assessment and action arising from the institution of the social in the body" (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, p. 87). This connection between objective and subjective is based on the physical body.

The body structure scheme is the centre of habitus concept – the structure and capacities of our body, from which we learn through assimilation or change of habits and dispositions. Through these corporal skills and guidelines, agents are able, in their turn, to engage themselves in the world of others. This is a matter of body, because what is embodied are acquired motion abilities, postural sets and social acts that create distinct forms of motility and perception. Hysteresis is an effect involved in the establishment of habitus, to the extent to which it internalizes the negative sanctions in a field away from its component dispositions (being at the origin of oppositional systems generation).

Therefore, understanding and perception that constitute a habitus, being congruent with the objective of field organization, tend to reproduce its very structures. Hence, Bourdieu regarded habitus as the key to social reproduction, because it is the generation and regulation centre of practices that constitute social life.

How an individual lives creates dispositions consistent with the objective conditions (including tastes in art, literature, food, and music) and in a sense, pre-adapted to their requirements.

In Bourdieu's theory, the action is not directly observable in practices or in habitus, but only in the experience of subjectivity. His references to habitus, it seems that so much of the individual's habitus is predetermined by social habitus, that these dispositions can neither be changed nor ignored.

In conclusion, habitus is a set of dispositions that generate practices and perceptions, and within the original meaning: a normal or typical condition, state or appearance of the body. In Bourdieu, it represents a combination of a) disposition, 2) generating and classifying schemes (Jenkins p. 74).

As a mediator between the influences of the past and present stimuli, habitus is at the same time structured by social model forces that have produced it, while structuring gives shape and consistency to the various activities of an individual in the distinct spheres of life. That is why Bourdieu defines it as "a product of history, habitus produces practices, individual and collective, hence history, according to the schemes generated by history; it ensures the active presence of past experiences that, deposited in any organism in the form of perception, thought and action schemes, tend more certain than all formal rules and explicit rules, to guarantee the conformity of practices and their consistency over time." (Pierre Bourdieu, *The Practical sense*, p.85).

Habitus is also a principle of both social continuity and the discontinuity: continuity because it stores social forces in the individual and carries them in time and space; discontinuity because it can be changed through the acquisition of new dispositions and because it can trigger innovation whenever encountering a social situation discordant to the established one.

Bourdieu regards *symbolic capital* (e.g. prestige, honour, care), as an essential source of power. When a symbolic capital holder uses his/her power against an agent who has less, and thus seeks to change his/her actions, thereby he/she exercises a symbolic violence.

### *Symbolic violence*

Symbolic violence is, fundamentally, the imposition of categories of thought and perception on the prevailing social agents. This is the incorporation of unconscious structures that tend to perpetuate the action structures of dominators. Symbolic violence is in some ways, more powerful than physical violence, since it is incorporated even in modes of action and knowledge structures of individuals, and imposes the legitimacy spectrum of social order.

Bourdieu's philosophical anthropology is not based on the concept of interest, but that of recognition. Contrary to a common reading of his work, his theory is not a utilitarian one, of social action, one by which the individuals make a conscious strategy to accumulate wealth, high status or power. But social existence means difference and difference implies hierarchy, which, in its turn, implies the infinite dialectic between distinction and claim, recognition and non-recognition, arbitrariness and necessity. The analysis of masculine domination, the form par excellence of symbolic violence, is based on the ethnological research of Kabylia

(North Africa). Symbolic violence is an act of non-recognition which is outside the control of consciousness and will, in the practical schemes of habitus. Men and women acquire different dispositions toward social games that are considered the most important. In the societies differentiated by class, the most appreciated games are those of politics, art, science, etc. This explains the lower status of women and it presupposes considering inequality of women's and men's statuses in the economy of symbolic exchanges.

Next we analyze how the exchange of gifts operates and what effects it has, starting from the concept of *symbolic capital* and the obligation to give something to the person from which you have received something.

*The Gift: "You give me / I give you" principle*

Capital is of three main types: economic (material and financial assets), cultural (symbolic goods, skills and titles) and social (resources gained by virtue of affiliation to a group). A fourth type, symbolic capital, designates the effects of any form of capital, when people do not perceive them as such (as when we ascribe noble moral qualities to upper class members as a result of their charitable money donations). Therefore, the position of an individual, group or institution in the social space can be established according to two coordinates, the total volume and composition of the capital it holds. A third coordinate, the variation of the volume and composition over time, marks their trajectory through social space and provides important clues about their habitus, revealing how and in which way they have reached the position they currently occupy.

While the idea of *gift* is very old, it appears to be an important sociological concept even today, especially in the business world. As Bourdieu points out, the mechanism of gifts exchange also structures practice in modern societies and, moreover, even practice in the economic field of the highly differentiated contemporary society (Practical sense, Bourdieu 2000, Chapter: Structures, habitus, practice). Reciprocity essence itself and accompanying feeling of gratitude are crucial in almost all societies. In the theory *Habitus - Field*, Bourdieu explained the sociological basis of gifts exchange, in the real world, where individuals and organizations exchange presents; the practical purposes is to build reliable partnerships in order to survive and to accumulate capital in the market where competitions are fierce (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). The practice of gifts exchange allows agents to bear small losses in order to build a stable and long relationship with another one. One more practical

reason behind giving gifts, also explained by Bourdieu, is to achieve supremacy over other persons or organizations, keeping them indebted by the favour granted in the form a gift.

The sociological analysis is the most powerful tool of human knowledge as social science and the freedom it may gain in spite of social determinisms. The general principles of symbolic assets economy start from the understanding of Kabylia's economy. I give you, you give me (*donnant-donnant*) expresses a conditioned exchange. For Mauss, gifts exchange is a discontinuous succession of generous acts, for Levi-Strauss, a transcendental reciprocity structure of exchange acts, where a gift presupposes a counter-gift. The determinant role of the time that passes from a gift to a counter-gift is underlined. In all the societies it is tacitly admitted that people should not respond immediately to what they have received, which would be equal to a refusal. Also this time interval's function is analyzed: why counter-gift should be deferred and different? It is explained that the time interval has a covering function between the gift and counter-gift, so that the two symbolic acts can look as a single acts, without any connection. The gift is a free, generous act, which is not intended to be returned (as there is always the risk not to be returned). Uncertainty in the time interval between the gift and counter-gift is therefore necessary. Exchanging gifts, which is seen as a paradigm of symbolic assets economy, is opposite to the "I give you, you give me" principle by the fact that it requires an agent to enter in the exchange game with no calculation. From the usual exchange acts to *potlatch* there is a level difference. The one that offers and the one that receives should have identical categories of perception and appreciation for the symbolic exchange to function properly. This finds the same applications to the symbolic domination that occurs with the complicity of the dominated ones. The most important and relevant aspect of symbolic violence is, no doubt, the transformation of domination relations, respectively submission in affective relationships, so that recognition becomes gratitude.

*Symbolic alchemy* produces a gratitude capital which symbolic effects are exercised, which Bourdieu called: *symbolic capital*. Since the structures of perception and appreciation are the result of objective structures incorporation, symbolic capital distribution of enjoys stability. "When we forget that the one who offers and the one who receives are prepared and inclined, through a long process of socialization, to enter with no intention and no profit calculation in the generous exchange whose logic is imposed

on them objectively, we can conclude there is not “free gift” or it is impossible, because, we can only think of the two agents as some computers offering as subjective project to do what they are objectively meant to do, according to Levi-Strauss's model, that is an exchange following the logic of reciprocity. "(Pierre Bourdieu, Practical reasons - A Theory of Action, p. 131)

### **Conclusions:**

In order to achieve the synthesis between objectivism and subjectivism, Bourdieu creates an original conceptual basis anchored in the terms of habitus, capital, field and doxa. Habitus designates the durable and transposable dispositions system by which we perceive, judge in act in the society. These schemes which are not normally aware of are acquired by the durable exposure to particular conditions and social conditioning, by internalizing the constraints and external circumstances. This means that they are shared by the persons who undergo similar experiences, even if each of them has an individual way of manifestation in that common matrix.

Symbolic capital refers to the effects of any capital forms, as a resource and means of exercising power through symbolic domination.

By creating feelings of affection and gratitude, the exchange of gifts is a form of domination itself, especially in case of disparity between the one who gives and the one who receives the gift. Bourdieu's vision of the society is a tough and infinite competition, where the specific differences of social, collective life appear. He showed it to us in a logical and clear manner, typical of his entire work.

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