

Habitus Entrapment: The Constrictive, Deterministic Habitus of Peter the Venerable

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Abstract

Habitus, as a concept, has been criticized for being constrictive and deterministic since Pierre Bourdieu first introduced it in 1967. Bourdieu transformed this term into a central concept in social theory, wherein the term refers to a collective entity in which predominant social and cultural conditions within a given society are entrenched and replicated. Habitus, consequently, guides agents/individuals in the way they respond, and it also informs their practices in their actual environments. Thus, Bourdieu's notion of habitus interplays the agent who is bound to a collective social structure with the agent who is free to act. But when can habitus be constrictive and deterministic? This study aims to answer this question. The study shows that when there is a complete and harmonious correlation between habitus and field, habitus becomes constrictive and deterministic. Peter the Venerable's translation project, The Toledo Collection, is a manifestation of such a conditioning relationship between habitus and field, under which habitus drove the reinforcement of the prevailing sentiments of the dominant institutions of the era, through the influence of translation choices.

Keywords: Bourdieu, constrictive, deterministic, field, habitus, Peter the Venerable

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Introduction

Habitus is a key concept of Bourdieu's social theory and is perhaps his most popular and most widely-referenced idea. The aim of this paper is to look critically at the conditions under which habitus could become constrictive and deterministic. Despite its standing, and despite Bourdieu's claim that habitus works by setting limits, rather than by determination, we argue that under certain conditions habitus acts as a constrictive and deterministic state producing actions that are informed and influenced by the inculcated habitus of the agent. In this study we evidence our argument by drawing on the case study of Peter the Venerable and his translation project *Collectio Toledana* (the *Toledo Collection*, also known as the *Cluniac Collection*). This study aims to examine and expose the conditions under which habitus becomes constrictive and deterministic

Literature Review

Habit, Habitus, and Habitualisation

Habitus as a concept has been contested by advocates and opponents since Pierre Bourdieu first introduced the term in 1967. In Bourdieu's theory of action, habitus is the internalised dispositions of agents that guide their actions and decisions. In other words, habitus means that social agents acquire long-lasting schemes of perceptions of thought and action, i.e., dispositions, engrained in them through the field(s) in which they operate. These dispositions are conditioned by the distinct life the agent lives. Habitus is thus central to generating and regulating the practices of agents, according to Bourdieu. Researchers who examine habitus emphasise that the concept is multi-layered and that it operates differently across different fields and in response to social changes. For example, Wacquant (2016, p. 64) accentuates that habitus encompasses a "dynamic, multi-scalar, and multilayered set of schemata subject to 'permanent revision' [...] which interacts with a 'system of positions' (e.g., fields) to generate action".

To fully appreciate the impact of habitus on Peter the Venerable, it is necessary to explore his trajectory, his early life, the social environment in which he was brought up, and the social realities he grew up to know. In other words, his socialization and professionalization process, that Bourdieu calls habitus (both primary and secondary), which formed his dispositions and informed his practices. This in turn, demands an understanding of some tenets of Bourdieu's concept of habitus. The circumstances of Bourdieu's formulation of his idea notwithstanding, one cannot deny the significance and effect of the 'habit' in our lives. This is apparent since humans are social beings who cannot be separated from social interaction and communication with the world around them. This interaction with the surrounding world starts at birth in the form of internalization of the prevalent values and norms at any particular moment in time.

In principle, Bourdieu's concept of habitus is intended to explain human practices without ignoring the regularity of the social practice. For Bourdieu, habitus is a scheme constructed of a combination of objective structures and personal histories, in the form of dispositions, which are durable and changing. This scheme serves as a generative basis for objectively structured and integrated practices. For the individual or agent, habitus is "an active residue or sediment of his past that functions within his present, shaping his perceptions, thought and action" (Crossley, 2001, p. 83). That is to say, habitus is "a system of acquired dispositions functioning on the practical level as categories of readings and opinions, as well as the organising principles of action" (Elgindy, 2013, p. 59). These dispositions are infused in the agent from an early age and are socially reinforced through the agent's culture. Thus, habitus is produced through and informed

by the objective conditions individuals experience resulting in the embodiment of tendencies to act in a certain way. Bourdieu's (1990) definition of habitus states that "habitus [...] functions as structuring structure" (p. 53). As such, habitus is structuring in the sense that it informs the various activities of an individual (Wacquant, 2006). An illustration of Bourdieu's concept is offered by Swartz (2002), who suggests that a child raised in a family of musicians is more likely, at least statistically, to develop musical aptitudes and acquire the knowledge necessary to appreciate good musical performance than a child raised in a family of athletes. Around us, there are many examples of children following their parents' career paths in accountancy, law, or medicine. Similarly, someone raised in a monastery is likely to acquire dispositions that uphold the values of the Church.

According to Bourdieu, Habitus is an essential factor in generating and regulating social practices because habitus, as Wacquant (2004) explains, relates to lasting dispositions or trained capacities and structured tendencies to think, feel, and act in determinate ways. This, in turn, guides individuals or agents in their responses and inform their practices in their present environment/circumstances. As such, habitus has a causal inter-determination of an individual's conduct, providing access to the internal motive of their actions.

Although habitus helps in understanding the behaviors, beliefs, or opinions which shape an individual's view of the world around them based on a shared and mutual relationship between the dispositions of individuals and the environment in which they operate, as argued by Wolfreys (2000), it must be noted that the dispositions acquired through the habitus function beyond the level of realization, in other words, below the level of consciousness (Bourdieu, 1977). Bourdieu's notion of habitus means that what a person says and does in their life is neither a reflection of pure desire nor wholly a product of social and material structures but a combination of both. Individuals in their actions are prompted by the structure of their social realities. The existing structures in the individual's society are internalised by and through social actors so that they function effectively. This internalisation occurs both intentionally and unintentionally, or consciously and unconsciously, through parenting, playing activities, and education in the community. The double reality of Bourdieu's habitus means that agents are individuals who are free to act according to their wishes but within social structures. On the one hand, the social actor/agent is an individual who is bound in a collective social structure, and on the other, the agent is an individual who is free to act, i.e., social actors/agents do not act as dummies or robots that move when prompted. By the very nature of the internalization process, habitus that exists at a particular time is the consequence of long-lasting collective life.

The Primary Habitus: Early Life of Peter the Venerable

In describing habitus, Wacquant offers the following:

Habitus designates the system of durable and transposable dispositions through which we perceive, judge and act in the world. These unconscious representations are acquired through lasting exposure to particular social conditions and conditionings, via the internalisation of external constraints and possibilities. (2006, p. 7)

It is important to distinguish between primary and secondary habitus. Primary habitus, or what is called 'implicit inculcation' in Bourdieu's theory, refers to the unconscious inculcation of dispositions. It is acquired in early childhood, slowly and gradually, through the gradual, often unconscious absorption of knowledge or ideas through continual exposure rather than deliberate

learning, and it is the way society becomes deposited in persons in the form of lasting dispositions or trained capacities and structured propensities to think, feel, and act. In contrast, the secondary habitus is acquired through “self-teaching and, or ‘scholastic acquisition’” (Bourdieu & Passeron 1977, cited by Yang, 2014, p. 1532).

Petrus Venerabilis, or Peter the Venerable, also known as Blessed Peter of Montboissier, (born 1092, Montboissier, Northern France — died 25 December 1156, Cluny, Burgundy), was the ninth abbot of the Benedictine Abbey of Cluny. Peter, a descendant of the noble family of Montboissier, was committed to Cluniac life as an oblate at a very young age (*Fournet, 1911*), following a meeting between his mother, Blessed Raingarde, with the Blessed Abbot Hugh, who, upon seeing her heavily pregnant said, “Know that the fruit of your womb is dedicated to God.” To this, she responded, “Lord, if it is a boy, your will shall be done.” When the baby was a boy, he was known as Peter. After some time, the infant was given to God by his mother in the monastery of Sauxillanges of the Congregation of Cluny, where he made his profession at the age of seventeen to its abbot, St Hugh. In the Catholic Church, a religious profession is the solemn admission of men or women into consecrated life employing pronouncement of religious vows (Herbermann, 1913). In 1122, he was elected abbot of Cluny (Catholic Encyclopaedia n.d.). Peter, known for his strong beliefs in the Cluniac values, endeavored to restore order in the mother abbey and defend the Cluniac model against attacks from new monastic models, notably the Cistercians (*Fournet, 1911*).

The Secondary Habitus: Self-Teaching and Scholastic Achievement

Peter the Venerable was only twenty years old when he was appointed professor and prior of the monastery of Vézelay, where he performed his Cluniac duties in that house. Later, in the monastery of Domène, with such success and distinction and at the age of 30, he was elected general of the order, which counted no less than 2000 houses throughout Europe (*Fournet, 1911*). St. Bernard of Clairvaux was the first to give Peter the honorable title ‘Venerable’, having acknowledged his distinguished virtue. Peter was prominent within the Church; he wrote the rules of the Congregation of Cluny and for St. Bernard, the former noted as one of the most complete codes of religious life, and Peter was described as the soul and the light of the General Council of Pisa (Catholic Encyclopaedia, n.d.). Peter was entrusted with delicate missions by the Pope of Rome, and tendered advice to a number of European Kings and Emperors, and despite his many commitments, he found time to write theological works on the Divinity of Christ, and the Real Presence (Catholic Encyclopaedia, n.d.). It is apparent that Peter was a devout Christian. He was, according to Tolan, a versed “reader of the Church Fathers--Augustine and others--who often wielded their pens against deviant Christologies” (2008, p. 48).

Krtizeck highlights the character of Peter by stating that “in his mind his function as abbot and head of his order was itself only a part of his function as a man of the Church” (1964, p. 24). Krtizeck also argues that “his life and work involved almost every aspect of ecclesiastical history in the first half of the twelfth century [...] he was formed by the Cluny at the height of its magnificence [...] and any attempt to explain him must make ample use of that fact” (p. 5).

The religious upbringing, in terms of education and socialization, meant that what was rational and what was irrational, what was good and what was bad, what was acceptable and what was unacceptable, what was right and what was wrong for Peter was a product of his ecclesiastical history, i.e., his Christian saturated habitus. Peter believed that the Muslims, like anyone with

beliefs outside the doctrines of the Church, should be the subject of he viewed as Christian Salvation. Hence, he set out to study Islam. In doing so however, Peter was on a mission, which was formed and informed by the constrictive deterministic nature of his habitus. It is safe to argue that Peter's actions were prompted and guided by the structure of both his ecclesiastical social realities, and his individual freedom to act following his dispositions, which were, in a way, the same. Producing knowledge about Islam and Muslims that could be used by the Church to ridicule Islam (Kesselman, 2008) was a value shared by Peter and the Church. This highlights the correlation between the social structure and the individual's free will in Peter's case. It is at this juncture the potentially constrictive deterministic nature of habitus comes into play. When the social structure fully matches the agent's free will, habitus becomes constrictive and deterministic as there is no longer any impetus to challenge prevailing sentiments or the status quo.

The Cluniac Collection: A Manifestation of a Constrictive Deterministic Habitus

Peter the Venerable's Cluniac Collection (the *Toledo Collection*) was a translation of selected texts about Islamic doctrine and Peter's own refutation of it. Concerning his intention of undertaking this project, Negru (2018) wrote in his book *History of the Apocalypse* that Peter's intentions resulted in explaining similarities between the two religions (Islam and Christianity) in the worst light possible. Negru further asserts that Peter the Venerable's project was primarily motivated by the urge to help Christian scholars doctrinally refute Islamic teachings. Besides the aims highlighted by Kesselman and Negru, awakening the Christian people to the danger facing their faith with the emergence of Islam was a high aim of Peter. This is demonstrated in a prologue to *The Refutation of the Sect of Heresy of the Saracens*, which was part of the *Toledo Collection*. In this prologue, Peter wrote:

Because the Latin-speaking peoples and most particularly those of most recent times, losing their ancient zeal [...] have not known the various languages of the former wonderful Apostles, but only their own language into which they were born in that condition they could not know what such an error [as Islam] was or, consequently, put up any resistance to it. For this reason, my heart glowed within me and a flame was enkindled in my mediation. (Cited by Kritzeck, 1964, p. 30)

Peter the Venerable held disavowing views about Islam and its Prophet. This can be clearly observed in his communique with Bernard of Clairvaux as he states:

I have translated from the Arabic into Latin language the unholy sectarian doctrine, the life of the nefarious man [Mohammed], and the law, which he calls the Koran, that is 'a collection of precepts' and which he led the most miserable folk to believe was brought down to him from heaven by the angel Gabriel (cited in Kritzeck, 1964, p. 32)

Peter's Christian devotion was the motivation for him to undertake this translation project. The aim was to defend and protect the Christian faith and to refute and defeat Islam. This was his free-willed desire, and it was also the internalized Christian values he attained over time through the socialization process. In other words, the two facets of the habitus, i.e., the social structure and the freedom to act, coincided. At this point, as it has already been mentioned, habitus becomes constrictive and deterministic. The fingerprint of Peter's dispositions, which were ingrained in him from a very early age and enhanced through his trajectory, can be observed in the selection of the texts to be translated and the translators he chose to carry out this project.

In order of translation, according to Kesselman (2008), Peter's translation collection included:

1. *The life* – Fabulae Sarracenorum
2. *The origin* - The Liber generationis Mahumet
3. *The Saracens doctrine* - The Doctrina Mahumet
4. *The apology of al-Kindi* – The Epistola Saraceni et Rescriptum Christiani
5. *The law* – the Koran (p. 3)

These different strands of foundational translations played a significant role in establishing a specific image and representation of Islam, its Prophet, and its culture, which was “polemic in purpose and scurrilous in tone” (Lewis, 1993, p. 85), which was the purpose of the project. This claim is emphasized by Ames in her 2015 book *Medieval Heresies* when she claims that it is apparent from Peter’s several anti-Jewish and anti-Muslim treaties that the aim of ‘better knowing Islam’ was to find a better way to attack it. Ames (2015) further claims that Peter saw Prophet Mohammed as just another heresy, an expression meant to ridicule Islam and its doctrine. This study argues that Peter’s view and interpretation of Islam as a “heresy” emanates from his robust ecclesiastical socialization process and the Cluniac habitus he experienced. This argument is supported by Peter’s reference to his predecessors when he claims that his work is similar to “several of the Fathers who attempted summary refutations of all the heresies of their times” (cited in Kritzeck, 1964, p. 38); this he wrote in a letter to Peter of Clairvaux, which indicates a continued habitus of spirited theological defense of the Church’s beliefs over the years. Peter also says, “The Church of God always did and does this, and, by the zealous hands of her husbandmen, roots out the brambles and thorns which are detrimental to the Lord’s sowing” (Kritzeck, 1964, p. 38).

According to Bourdieu (1990), habitus generates schemes of thoughts, perceptions, and actions inherited in the particular conditions of its productions. Considering the conditions under which Peter’s dispositions formed and developed, and considering Swartz’s (2002) assertion about “Habitus and Habitus-Governed Action” (2002, p. 62S), it is almost inevitable that Peter’s practices would be within the limits and constraints of his habitus. This accumulated experience, anchored in a solid ecclesiastical foundation, informed his selection process when appointing translators to undertake the translation project.

Peter the Venerable chose the translators during his visit to Spain in 1142. Considering the aims for which these translations were produced, the narrative they were made to serve and the interests of the Church, Peter, guided by his ecclesiastical history, was likely to appoint translators who hold strong Christian values and who satisfy specific criteria in line with the Church’s aims and objectives.

There is evidence of five translators associated with the Toledo translation project, according to Kritzeck (1964) and Goddard (2000). The translators associated with the Cluniac project were men of the Church in one way or another, which reflects Peter’s habitus. These were:

- **Peter of Poitiers** was a monk of Cluny, an academic theologian, a modern Latin poet, and a translator. He served as the abbot’s notary, in other words, as Peter the Venerable’s secretary, and there was a strong bond of friendship between them (Kritzeck, 1964). Based on the evidence available to Kritzeck (1964) Peter of Poitiers shared Peter the Venerable’s scholarly enthusiasms. There is a strong claim that “he has served as the Grand Prior of Cluny and been elected abbot of St. Martial at Limoges a few months before Peter the Venerable’s death in 1156” (Kritzeck, 1964, p. 60). The background and trajectory of Peter of Poitiers exhibit the ecclesiastical dispositions that

qualified him to be acquainted with this translation project and show, we argue, that the translators' selection was guided by Peter the Venerable's habitus.

- **Robert of Ketton** was an English theologian and the archdeacon of the Church of Pamplona, "an ecclesiastical position of consequence, which may indicate that he was a priest" (Kritzeck, 1964, p. 62). He was put in charge of translating the Qur'an. It is safe to argue that the choice of Robert of Ketton would uphold and secure the reproduction of Christian values, which is in line, we discuss, with the pastoral dispositions Peter the Venerable acquired and to which he acted in accordance. Robert held the same views about the Muslims, which shows the correlation between his dispositions and those of Peter the Venerable. In his dedicatory letter to the translation of the *Fabulae Saracenorum* and his prefatory letter to the Qur'an, Robert describes Islam as the "greatest heresy of all" (Kritzeck 1964, p. 64). A further illustration of Robert's dispositions and view of Islam, which were similar to those of the Venerable, may be seen in a letter he wrote to Peter, saying, "I have uncovered Mohammed's smoke so that it may be extinguished by your bellows" (Kritzeck, 1964, p. 65). Robert of Ketton was a long-term associate of Herman of Dalmatia, another translator in this project.
- **Herman of Dalmatia** was a pupil of Thierry of Chartres and was associated with the Cathedral School of Chartres, which supports the claim that he was a priest. In his evaluation of the translators, Peter the Venerable described Herman as "a scholar of the most incisive and literary genius" (Kritzeck, 1964, p. 66). Herman and Robert worked together for many years and were close friends, and evidence shows that they had been together for some time when the Venerable met them in Spain. It is likely that they shared the same views about Islam and had similar dispositions formed by the prevailing Christian values of that period in Toledo.
- **Peter of Toledo**, often referred to as 'Master Peter of Toledo' by Peter the Venerable, and sometimes referred to as *magister* ('expert') in Arabic and Latin (Kritzeck, 1964, p. 56). He was one of the twelfth century's most important translators into Latin. Master Peter was very influential to the extent that Haskins (1924) suggests that the interest in producing a Latin translation of the Qur'an "was whetted, if not originally inspired, by the theological interests and manuscripts of the learned Mozarab Master Peter of Toledo" (Haskins, 1924 - cited in Bishko, 1956). Kritzeck (1964) goes further than Haskins by saying, "it is highly probable that Peter of Toledo not only planned the Toledan Collection for Peter the Venerable, but also annotated it" (p. 57). Peter of Toledo, according to Kritzeck, was "as conversant with Islam as any Toledan Christian of his time could have been" (1964, p. 57). This time being the period of Christian revival after Alfonso VI captured Toledo in 1085.
- **Mohammed**, a Muslim Moor Arab, was mentioned by Peter the Venerable as a translator in the *Doctrine of the Saracens*. He was entrusted by Peter to ensure that the translations did not lack trustworthiness and that the integrity of the translation was maintained (Kritzeck, 1964). It seems that Mohammed's job was to give information to the translators about the exact meanings of Arabic words and possibly on Islamic doctrine in general, according to Kritzeck (1964). Finally, Kritzeck (1964) states that "Mohammed cannot be identified more closely from any evidence known" (p. 69).

The translated texts were utilized by Peter the Venerable to write his refutation of Islam. This represents further substantiation of the deterministic influence of Peter's habitus on his practices. He wrote *The Summa Totius Haeresis Saracenorum* (*The Summary of the Heresy of the Saracens*), which exhibits his manipulation of information in order to pursue his subjective narrative:

It seems necessary to speak about [Mohammed] who he is, and what he taught, for the benefit of those who will read this book, so they may know how detestable both his life and his doctrine appear ... Mohammed was, and it is true, an Arab of humble birth ... because he was very active in worldly affairs he advanced from low birth and poverty to wealth and renown. Having raised himself up little by little, and frequently attacking all those who were near him ... with wiles, robberies, and invasions ... he was able to increase the terror of his name, ... and he when came on top in contests he began to aspire to the kingship of his people ... and when he perceived that he could not attain for himself his desire in this way, he tried to become king under the cloak of religion and by the name of 'divine prophet' (p. 125-126)

This anti-Islamic polemic work that Peter the Venerable wrote resulted from his monastic education, his experience as a monk and abbot, and a reflection of the prevailing fears of twelfth-century Europe. Furthermore, it illustrates Peter's faithfulness to his inherited faith. In other words, this manifests the correlation between his habitus and the field within which he operates.

Habitus and Field: A Conditioning Relationship

It is evident from Bourdieu's Theory of Practice that one cannot fully appreciate the impact of habitus without considering the correlation between habitus and field. For Bourdieu, the relationship between habitus and field is a two-way relation of conditioning (Yang, 2014). As Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) explain, the field is the actual physical space we occupy, which constructs the habitus, while our understanding of that physical world in which we live is based on the habitus taught in the individual(s) living in it. In the case of Peter the Venerable, as demonstrated earlier, his habitus was constructed in a field with specific values. These, in turn, formed Peter's dispositions, which in turn informed his understanding of the world around him.

To further highlight this relationship between the field and habitus, we need to consider Bourdieu's acknowledgement of the 'hysteresis effect' or 'structural gap'. Bourdieu recognizes hysteresis in times of mismatch and/or disruption between field and habitus, "in particular, when a field undergoes a major crisis and its regularities (even its rules) are profoundly changed" (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 160), which may lead the agent to innovate or override the dispositions inculcated in him through the primary habitus. In the case of Peter the Venerable, there were no irregularities between his habitus, whether primary or secondary, and the field within which he operated. Consequently, there was a complete and harmonious correlation between Peter's habitus and the field, and as a result his habitus worked as a constrictive deterministic force directing his practices.

Conclusion

This study argues that under certain circumstances habitus becomes constrictive and deterministic. In Bourdieu's social theory, once habits are established, they endure and are not easily changed. Primary habitus, in Bourdieu's view, is more constructive of internal dispositions than secondary habitus. In other words, primary socialisation is more influential than secondary

socialisation. Bourdieu's theory also suggests that dispositions' modification can happen when habitus confronts new situations in which the dispositions inculcated by the habitus do not fit with the rules of the field within which the individual operates. In this circumstance, agents try to adjust to the new situation by innovating or overriding their inculcated habitus. However, if the habitus and field are 'in sync' and there are no irregularities between them, the likely outcome is a reproduction of the inculcated habitus.

Peter the Venerable's case was kind of a 'perfect storm' where his habitus, both primary and secondary, was in 'perfect sync' with the field within which he operated, which resulted in the constrictive deterministic influence on his actions.

Tolan (2008) states that as a child oblate, Peter was "virtually weaned on the Bible and Church fathers" (p. 47), which formed his primary habitus. Then he was "a reader of the Church Fathers" (p. 48), which informed his secondary habitus. As far as the field was concerned, Peter's aim was not to study Islam as a religion, but to refute what he saw as a "vile form of heresy" (p. 47). The available texts show that the prevailing perceptions of Islam in twelfth-century Western Europe, or Latin Christendom, were very similar to Peter's own view of it as a deviation from Christianity, a dangerous heresy that must be confronted and defeated. This was Peter's worldview and the view of the world he experienced, inculcated in him by the 'structured structures' surrounding him functioning as 'structuring structures', and reproduced by the producer.

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