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REVIEW ESSAY

Symbolic power, politics and teachers

Aspa Baroutsis

School of Education, The University of Queensland, Brisbane, Queensland, Australia

Symbolic power, politics, and intellectuals: The political sociology of Pierre Bourdieu. David L. Swartz, University of Chicago Press, 2013, 292 pp., USD \$27.50 (paperback), ISBN: 9780226925011.

Introduction

In the book, *Symbolic power, politics, and intellectuals: The political sociology of Pierre Bourdieu*, David L. Swartz (2013) frames his discussion around the notion of power while focusing on Bourdieu's 'political sociology', a 'largely neglected' aspect of Bourdieu's work. Swartz (2013) suggests that Bourdieu offers a 'sociology of politics' as well as a 'politics of sociology'. Therefore, sociology is a form of political engagement or as Bourdieu (2000a) suggests, 'scholarship with commitment' that enables a move towards 'more just and democratic life' (Swartz, 2013, p. i). This essay offers an outline of Swartz's reading of Bourdieu's political sociology using three of his 'thinking tools' and demonstrates the value of this book for analysing the cross-field effects of journalism and education (also see, Lingard & Rawolle, 2004; Rawolle, 2005).

Swartz intricately and meticulously takes the reader on a historical and contextual journey through Bourdieu's life and works, focusing on the notion of power as a form of domination. He skilfully provides explanations, elaborations, and examples of Bourdieu's writings and thinking, generating a detailed historical summary. In focusing on Bourdieu's political sociology, Swartz outlines Bourdieu's research agenda related to his politically-oriented sociology projects, as well as areas of his political activism later in his career and his

late polemical writings. Swartz masterfully develops critical understandings of Bourdieu's *oeuvre* by contextualising, comparing, and analysing similarities and differences with the theoretical concepts of other scholars and theorists, in particular Max Weber. This enables readers who are both familiar and unfamiliar with Bourdieu's work to engage with his conceptual tools, what Bourdieu calls his 'thinking tools', as Swartz provides anchor points for developing deeper understandings. Equally commendable is Swartz's determination to identify tensions, critiques and gaps in Bourdieu's conceptualisations of the relationships between sociology and politics; something that Swartz often reconciles at the end of each of the analytic chapters.

Across the eight chapters, Swartz outlines the key understandings of Bourdieu's sociology through an overview of his key conceptual tools (chapters 2) and an analysis of two of these tools—capitals and fields—in relation to the notion of power (chapter 3). These foundation chapters are augmented by more specific ones that develop Swartz's argument about Bourdieu's relevance for those interested in political sociology (chapters 1, 6, 8) and Bourdieu's public interventions and political activism (chapter 7). In two outstanding chapters of the book, Swartz specifically focuses on symbolic power as a form of domination (chapter 4) and Bourdieu's analysis of the state (chapter 5), again stressing Bourdieu's notions of power.

This review essay briefly outlines elements of Swartz's argument regarding Bourdieu's political sociology, using the concepts as they are structured throughout the book, and focusing on three key modes of analysis of power in the form of social domination: valued resources (capital), arenas of struggle (fields), and legitimation (symbolic power). This is followed by a discussion of symbolic power and how it operates in the journalistic and political fields, and across the education field, focusing in particular on symbolic power and violence associated with a number of media practices in the education field. Here, examples

are drawn from the Australian print media, specifically *The Australian* which is a News Limited newspaper.

Power, domination, and social order

Bourdieu was interested in power, particularly power in the form of social domination, and the mechanisms and processes that are used to disguise, reproduce, and perpetuate power in different societies (Swartz, 2013; Wacquant, 1996). Swartz (2013) explains that domination is ‘systemic power embedded in the patterns of thought, basic assumptions, linguistic terms and categories, and social relationships that shapes how individuals go about their everyday lives though individuals are rarely aware of its influence’ (pp. 30-31), thereby maintaining the social order. This order is not found in ‘human reason’, is not a ‘naturally endowed right’, or a ‘social contract’, or ‘consent or reason’, nor is it based on ‘universal principles’ (Swartz, 2013, p. 31). Rather, as Bourdieu (2000b) argued, ‘there is nothing other than arbitrariness and usurpation’ in relation to maintaining social order (p. 168). Additionally, social and political order originate in ‘violence’, are crystallised as ‘custom’, and are maintained and transmitted through ‘bodily dispositions’ (habitus) (Swartz, 2013, p. 33), a point that will be taken up later in this essay.

Specifically, Bourdieu analyses power in three distinct ways, each of which operates as a form of domination. The three modes of analysis are: power in valued resources (capitals); power in particular arenas or spheres (fields) and power in legitimation (symbolic power) (Swartz, 2013). First, power as a valued resource, which Bourdieu calls *capital*, includes the following forms of capital: ‘economic (money and property), cultural (information, knowledge, and educational credentials), social (acquaintances and networks), and symbolic [resources] (legitimation, authority, prestige)’; these often become the objects and instruments of struggle (Swartz, 2013, p. 50). While these capitals can function to

enhance economic worth, they are not always material or quantifiable, and often include social and symbolic capitals. For example, ‘profits from education ... can be measured not just in income but in tastes, verbal style, [and] manners’ (p. 53). The accumulation and exchange of capitals serves to maintain and enhance an individual’s position in the social or political order (Swartz, 2013, p. 55). For example, Swartz (2013) explains, ‘[the] concept of cultural capital does not reduce to knowledge and skills directly related to productivity but represents a capacity to make individuals more effective actors within a particular social milieu’ (p. 53). As such, Bourdieu views capitals as both social and relational in character. Swartz (2013) explains, ‘an object becomes a capital when it establishes a *social relation of power* that differentiates the holder from the nonholder, when it establishes some degree of social closure – a relation of inclusion and exclusion’ (p. 51, emphasis added). Of interest here is the uneven distribution of capitals, which are a form of power across social groups, and the ‘differentiating and stratifying effect’ of such inclusions and exclusions (Swartz, 2013, p. 51).

Secondly, Bourdieu indicates that ‘a capital does not exist and function except in relation to a field’ (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 101). Consequently, power is analysed as specific *fields* of struggle. Bourdieu (1993) suggests,

The structure of the field is a state of the power relations among the agents or institutions engaged in the struggle, or, to put it another way, a state of the distribution of the specific capital which has been accumulated in the course of previous struggles and which orients subsequent strategies. (p. 73)

Bourdieu also states, ‘to think in terms of field is to think relationally’ (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 96); that is, capitals, individuals, groups and institutions are all interdependent in networks of relations that shape the social order. Therefore, these networks are ‘arenas of production, circulation, and appropriation of goods, services, knowledge, or

status, and the competitive positions held by actors in their struggle to accumulate and monopolize different kinds of capital' (Swartz, 2013, p. 57). This field struggle is often over the 'distribution of capitals' within a given field, but also over the 'most legitimate form of capital', thereby becoming a struggle for symbolic power and the right to dominate and determine what is the most legitimate, and therefore, the most valued form of capital in a particular field (Swartz, 2013, p. 35). The dominant groups distinguish themselves from the other classes by their 'sheer volume of capital', while also competing amongst themselves in order to 'impose their particular type of capital as the most legitimate claim to authority in the social order' (Swartz, 2013, p. 36). As actors participate in the struggle, Swartz (2013) suggests they 'unwittingly reproduce the structure of power relations within and across fields ... misrecognising the arbitrary character of capitals by viewing them and the struggle over them as necessary' (p. 60). This he interprets as demonstrating how power is misrecognised because of the action of habitus, but also because of the actors' very participation in the struggle (Swartz, 2013, p. 60).

Of all the fields, the field of power is considered a key feature of Bourdieu's thinking in relation to how power is dispersed in various societies (Swartz, 2013, p. 61). Bourdieu refers to the field of power as 'the relations of force that obtain between the social positions which guarantee their occupants a quantum of social force, or of capital, such that they are able to enter into the struggles over the monopoly of power' (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, pp. 229-230). The field of power is the arena where struggle occurs between fields, for example the economic and cultural fields, for the 'right to dominate *throughout the social order*' (Swartz, 2013, p. 62, emphasis in original). Bourdieu (1996) indicates that this is the space where:

These different forms of capital are themselves stakes in the struggles whose objective is no longer the accumulation of or even the monopoly on a particular form of capital (or

power) ... but rather the determination of the relative value and magnitude of the different forms of power that can be wielded in the different fields or, if you will, power over the different forms of power or the capital granting power over capital. (p. 265)

Swartz (2013) identifies this struggle as being over the control of the state and therefore domination over institutional function, legitimation, and the power to circulate political doxa that become naturalised in society (pp. 62, 138).

Symbolic power, a form of domination, requires *legitimation*, which is the final element of this analysis of power. Symbolic power extends beyond types of resources (capitals) and arenas of struggle (fields) to that which 'legitimizes the stratified social order' of all social life (Swartz, 2013, p. 78). The notion of legitimation relates to commonly held, shared assumptions about the social order, or as Bourdieu (1990) suggests, a 'doxa' that is a 'kind of original adherence to the established order' (p. 127). Doxa are not equally shared amongst the dominant and dominated parties, with Bourdieu (1994) suggesting 'doxa is a particular point of view, the point of view of the dominant, when it presents and imposes itself as a universal point of view' (p. 15). Swartz (2013) states that symbolic power involves the 'capacity to impose symbolic meanings and forms as legitimate', thereby shaping a society's perceptions of social reality, but also involves the capacity to either maintain or transform social realities by shaping representations through 'inculcating classifications, schema of perceptions ... cognitive schemes and bodily expression'; therefore, symbolic power forms the 'dispositions of habitus' (pp. 83, 89). Symbolic power is often experienced as 'taken-for-granted, natural, [or an] inevitable state of affairs', making it a generative and 'imposed power' that is a 'cultural expression of dominance'; however, this also ensures that it is a 'contested power, being both the object and instrument of social struggle' (Swartz, 2013, p. 83). Swartz (2013) adds that symbolic struggles occur for one of two reasons: 'to

either maintain and reinforce public perceptions of existing social realities ... or to transform those perceptions and in doing so create conditions for social change' (p. 88).

Symbolic violence and symbolic capital are expressions of domination because they are used to stress the legitimation of power in a society. Symbolic violence is often disguised and Bourdieu (2001b) suggests that it is 'a gentle violence, imperceptible and invisible even to its victims, exerted for the most part through the purely symbolic channels of communication and cognition (more precisely, misrecognition), or even feeling' (pp. 1-2). Swartz (2013) suggests that symbolic violence is often 'misrecognised obedience,' where symbolic power is accepted as legitimate rather than arbitrary (p. 83). Additionally, symbolic capital, such as the 'esteem, recognition, belief, credit, confidence of others', often represents the perceived authority to exercise symbolic power (Bourdieu, 2000b, p. 166).

In the following section, following Swartz's (2013) understandings of Bourdieu's political sociology, this essay will draw substantially on notions of symbolic power and how it operates in the journalistic, political and educational fields. In particular, it will focus on the implications of symbolic power and violence on media practices associated with reportage about teachers and their work, drawn from the Australian print media.

Symbolic violence, media institutions, and teachers

Symbolic power and violence circulate within the practices of media institutions, at times operating inequitably in relation to the ways reportage represents teachers and their work. However, symbolic violence also operates in relation to journalists, who are the agents of media institutions. That is, both teacher(s) and journalist(s) experience the effects of symbolic violence, albeit in different ways. The media institutions, as the dominant group, often through the actions of their agents, impose their ideology on other groups such as the readers of their newspapers, through their reportage of education-related issues. Such practices that

influence public perceptions of teachers are maintained through symbolic power that exercises control over the circulation of ideas, thereby legitimating and naturalising the media institution's constructions of teachers. Therefore, symbolic power and violence often intersect.

Bourdieu conceives symbolic power through a 'power over' distinction that suggests it has the 'capacity to impose a social vision of the world as the most legitimate one' (Swartz, 2013, p. 119). That is, media institutions may exercise power 'over' their readers or those who they report on, by imposing their world view on their employees or the general public who view their publications and broadcasts. Media texts in newspapers may 'naturalise' certain negative understandings of teachers, thereby projecting a 'taken-for-granted' or 'commonsensical' perception of teachers and their work. Baroutsis (2014) has found that newspaper texts construct teachers as being in need of greater regulation, so as to improve teacher accountability, and greater transparency in their practices and therefore in need of auditing practices. News texts also suggested teachers across Australia were often poor 'quality' and incompetent, and privileged in terms of their conditions of service, but reckless in their execution of their duties. Symbolic power is formative of such realities (Swartz, 2013). Such reportage suffers from what Bourdieu (2011) refers to as 'structural amnesia', where media reportage fails to move debates forward, instead legitimating simplistic and narrow understandings, in this case, of teachers. Each news story under these conditions of structural amnesia is seen to be new, not linked to any past reportage. This orients in people's minds a particular version of 'reality', thereby maintaining power 'over' teachers and limiting their opportunities to voice alternative versions.

Symbolic power, therefore, operates in a hegemonic mode. In this example of the media, the dominant group is often the media institution, who may dominate journalists into producing stories that align with editorial perspectives and the socio-political views of media

ownership (Baroutsis, 2014; Mockler, 2013). For example, journalists are delegated authority to speak on behalf of the institutional group; however, the group's interests often determine their individual actions and ways of speaking (Swartz, 2013, p. 108). At other times, the dominant agent of the group may be the editor of the media organisation, as was seen in the Leveson Inquiry (2012) in the UK, which heard that Rebekah Brooks, the former *News of the World* editor, levered politicians' cooperation through 'a fear of allegedly ... prying intrusively into their personal lives', including personal attacks in the press (p. 65). Such insidious practices operate as symbolic violence, involving the media agents 'bending under the weight of domination ... [and as] an assault against the personhood of the individual and authentic identity of the group' (Swartz, 2013, p. 97). Bourdieu (1996) explains this notion, stating that symbolic violence can involve an individual's predisposition to,

Perform the institution's every wish because they are the institution made man (or woman), and who, whether dominated or dominant, can submit to it or fully exercise its necessity only because they have incorporated it, they are of one body with it, they give body to it. (p. 4)

Symbolic violence therefore secures 'compliance to domination through the shaping of beliefs' (Lukes, 2005, pp. 143-144) and actions or practices associated with the execution of such beliefs. Bourdieu (2011) suggests that this relates to the media policy of 'demagogic simplification', where media institutions and their agents are 'projecting onto the public their own inclinations and their own views' (p. 3).

Therefore, given such practices, trust becomes a key issue for media institutions and their agents. It can be argued that power operating in media institutions is largely symbolic, given that the agents within these institutions are dependent on symbolic capitals such as 'trust' or 'credit' that is extended to them from those groups they represent (Swartz, 2013, p. 106). Blackmore and Thorpe (2003) state that agents of media institutions are often

considered with suspicion and characterised by mistrust and cynicism. As such, journalists, engage in symbolic labour in order to maintain and develop their symbolic capital (Swartz, 2013, p. 106), at times with varying degrees of success.

Bourdieu (2001b) often referred to the notion of the ‘paradox of *doxa*’, which suggests that symbolic power and violence as forms of domination have a tendency to persist within the order of the world:

The established order, with its relations of domination, its rights and prerogatives, privileges and injustices, ultimately perpetuates itself so easily, apart from a few historical accidents, and ... the most intolerable conditions of existence can so often be perceived as acceptable and even natural. (p. 1)

Elaborating on this paradox, it can be asked: Why would teachers, or groups such as teachers’ unions that represent them, allow media institutions to persist with such symbolic violence through socially inequitable media constructs without powerful resistance (Swartz, 2013, pp. 37-38)? Bourdieu (1996) replies: ‘The dominated always contribute to their own domination, it is at once necessary to recall that the dispositions that include them toward this complicity are themselves the effect, embodied, of domination’ (p. 4). This is a somewhat surprising statement that sounds like Bourdieu is ‘blaming the victim’. However, Swartz (2013) suggests that the actions of the non-dominant groups are ‘not out of choice or from external constraints but from the “fit” between the expectations of their habitus and the external structures they encounter’ (p. 98). Habitus, therefore, plays an important role in perpetuating and reproducing injustices within various field struggles.

Media institutions and their agents operate within the journalistic field, but also across the education and political fields; for example, journalists interview politicians or teachers (educators) in order to obtain a story (Bourdieu, 2005). Politicians are often responsible for aspects of education policy and the circulation of information regarding teachers and schools.

Bourdieu (2005) posits the hypothesis that the journalist and the educator occupy 'determinate positions in the field'; thus we see the journalistic and education fields speaking to each other (p. 31). This raises the question of the 'degree of autonomy' of fields (Bourdieu, 2005, p. 33). Bourdieu (2005) suggests that the journalistic field is characterised by a 'high degree of heteronomy' making it a 'very weakly autonomous field', therefore it cannot be understood by its own '*nomos*, its own law of functioning' and 'the effects that the people engaged in this microcosm exert on one another' (p. 33). Here we see the cross-field effects, or the 'effects that result from the interrelations between fields' (Rawolle, 2005, p. 709), with Lingard and Rawolle (2004) suggesting these can be 'structural, event [related], systemic, temporal, hierarchical and vertical' effects (p. 368). While field struggles and cross-field effects are significant elements in understanding the practices of media institutions that perpetuate injustices, considerations must also be given to the habitus of the social agents.

Bourdieu (1990) suggests that in order for the agents in these fields to succeed, they need to develop a 'feel for the game' (p. 9). Swartz (2013) elaborates on this, stating that this can involve 'specific skills, competencies, sensitivities that are attuned to the particular conditions of the field' with many behaviours being shaped by the logic of the field (p. 106); that is, the habitus of actors, including embodied dispositions and schemes of practice (Lingard, Sellar & Baroutsis, 2014). Swartz (2013) adds that symbolic power shapes habitus and 'the dispositions of habitus predispose actors to select forms of conduct that are most likely to succeed in light of their resources and past experience. Habitus orients action according to anticipated consequences' (p. 90). For example, newspaper editors hire opinion writers, whose writing aligns with the newspaper's ideologies. Journalists have a greater chance of having their articles published if they also align their texts with the perspectives of the editors and opinion writers (Baroutsis, 2014). Consequently, the effects of symbolic power are 'expressed through practices – a practical logic – rather than in sets of explicit

beliefs or values', with these practices being 'unconscious and resistant to conscious articulation and critical reflection' (Swartz, 2013, p. 89).

Other journalistic practices that reflect the habitus of agents include the use of language in media reportage. Language is a central feature when exercising symbolic power, in that 'symbolic power is expressed through language' giving it a performative quality (Swartz, 2013, p. 86). Language in newspaper texts constructs a particular teacher identity. Take for example newspaper reportage about teachers, based on the actions of teachers' unions, that suggest teachers are 'militant' (Costa, 2009, 10 July, p. 12), 'ideological warriors' (*The Australian*, 2010, 17 February, p. 13) who are 'waging a war' (Buckingham, 2009, 15 December, p. 12) against society. They are identified as being 'on the fringes of the education debate, [and] out of touch with reality' (*The Australian*, 2010, 17 February, p. 13). Consequently, teachers and their unions are characterised as having 'little credibility' (Albrechtsen, 2010, 3 February, p. 12), being 'selfish and arrogant' (Bantick, 2009, 29 July, p. 25), as well as 'unreasonable and reactionary' (Costa, 2009, 10 July, p. 12). They are often accused of 'indulging in industrial thuggery' if they undertake industrial action (*The Australian*, 2009, 24 July, p. 13). One commentator suggests, 'Teachers' unions care about protecting the jobs of teachers and the status quo of schools, no matter the performance of those teachers' (Albrechtsen, 2010, 3 February, p. 12). Such linguistic choices demonstrate the 'relations of symbolic power in which the power relations between speakers or their respective groups are actualized' (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 37). Therefore, these specific word choices, rather than other choices, not only give insights into the opinions of the newspapers, their editors and commentators, but also constitute these social and public realities of teachers and their work. Moreover, teachers and their representatives have little recourse in terms of being able to write and publically circulate alternative versions of these 'realities' in media texts or outlets.

In closing

Unfortunately, the voices of groups that are most affected by dominant media politics, for example, teachers, are not always heard in media texts and broadcasts (Bourdieu, 2001a; Swartz, 2013). Bourdieu challenges all public intellectuals, in this case teachers, to ‘expose the doxa of the fields of power’, challenging the naturalisation of media assumptions that are circulated about teachers and their work (Swartz, 2013, p. 172). Consequently, teachers would ‘enter the political arena not as political actors but as intellectuals who engage their specific authority of expertise’ (Swartz, 2013, p. 174). Sachs (2003) calls upon teachers to engage in greater activism. Here, she is not suggesting militant, extreme behaviour, but rather that teachers need to be ‘responding publically’ to the various issues, warning that this is ‘not for the faint-hearted’, as it ‘requires passion, determination and energy’ (p. 85). Bourdieu conceives this as ‘anti-political politics’, where intellectuals would ‘be able to make their voice heard directly in all the areas of public life in which they are competent’ (Bourdieu, 2001a, p. 9). Such calls towards ‘acts of resistance’ (Bourdieu, 2001a) constitute a generic capacity of action, working towards the non-dominant agents having a voice. Unlike the notion of the ‘power over’, these acts of resistance then become generative capacities of ‘power to’ act (Swartz, 2013, p. 119).

Swartz’s (2013) book provides an outstanding account of the political component of Bourdieu’s sociology. In particular, Swartz (2013) challenges the commonly held perception that symbolic power is just ‘symbolic’ in character, instead suggesting it permeates the practices of everyday life in both subtle and influential ways. The contribution of this book is to enable deeper and more transparent understandings of the power relations within a society. Swartz’s analysis demonstrates the relevance of Bourdieu’s thinking tools for education and education research. In the account given in this essay of practices across the fields of education and journalism, the book provides the impetus for challenging many of the

undemocratic aspects in these fields. Swartz foregrounds Bourdieu's tools for confronting, disrupting or resisting many of the practices associated with these fields, especially when they cross-over, so as to enhance democratic practices.

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