

An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology

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at negating history, precisely to remind us of the historicity of the economic agent, of the historical genesis of her aspirations and preferences?

Human action is not an instantaneous reaction to immediate stimuli, and the slightest “reaction” of an individual to another is pregnant with the whole history of these persons and of their relationship. To explain this, I could mention the chapter of *Mimesis* entitled “The Brown Stocking,” in which Erich Auerbach (1953) evokes a passage of Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse*, and the representations or, better, the repercussions that a minor external event triggers in Mrs. Ramsay’s consciousness. This event, trying on a stocking, is but a point of departure which, though it is not wholly fortuitous, takes value only through the indirect reactions it sets off. One sees well, in this case, that knowledge of stimuli does not enable us to understand much of the resonances and echoes they elicit unless one has some idea of the habitus that selects and amplifies them with the whole history with which it is itself pregnant.

This means that one can genuinely understand practices (including economic practices) only on condition of elucidating the economic and social conditions of production and actualization of the habitus that provides their dynamic principle.

By converting the immanent law of the economy into a universal and universally realized norm of adequate practice, RAT forgets—and hides—the fact that the “rational,” or, better, reasonable, habitus which is the precondition of an adequate economic practice is the product of a particular economic condition, defined by the possession of the minimum economic and cultural capital necessary actually to perceive and seize the “potential opportunities” formally offered to all. All the capacities and dispositions it liberally grants to its abstract “actor”—the art of estimating and taking chances, the ability to anticipate through a kind of practical induction, the capacity to bet on the possible against the probable for a measured risk, the propensity to invest, access to economic information, etc.—can only be acquired under definite social and economic conditions. They are in fact always a function of one’s power in, and over, the specific economy.⁷⁸

78. Bourdieu (1979c: 68 and passim) shows in *Algeria 1960* that Algerian sub-proletarians could not reach the “threshold of modernity” which constituted the boundary between them and the stable working class, and beneath which the formation of the “rational habitus” demanded by a rationalized (capitalist) economy was im-

Because it must postulate *ex nihilo* the existence of a universal, pre-constituted interest, RAT is thoroughly oblivious to the social genesis of historically varying forms of interests.

Moreover, the theory of habitus explains why the finalism of rational choice theory, although anthropologically false, may appear empirically sound. Individualistic finalism, which conceives action as determined by conscious aiming at explicitly posed goals, is indeed a well-founded illusion: the sense of the game which implies an anticipated adjustment of habitus to the necessities and probabilities inscribed in the field does present itself under the appearance of a successful “aiming at” a future. Likewise, the structural affinity of habituses belonging to the same class is capable of generating practices that are convergent and objectively orchestrated outside of any collective “intention” or consciousness, let alone “conspiracy.” In this fashion it explains many phenomena of quasi teleology which can be observed in the social world, such as those forms of collective action or reaction that pose such insuperable dilemmas to RAT.⁷⁹

The efforts of the proponents of one or another version of rational action theory remind me of Tycho Brahé trying to salvage the Ptolemaic paradigm after Copernicus. It is amusing to see them go back and forth, sometimes from one page to the next, between a mechanism that explains action by the direct efficacy of causes (such as market constraints) and a finalism which, in its pure form, wants to see nothing but the choices of a pure mind commanding a perfect will or which, in its more temperate forms, makes room for choices under

possible, so long as their “entire occupational existence was placed under the rule of the arbitrary” imposed by permanent insecurity and extreme deprivation (further exacerbated, in this case, by the cultural shock created by the disappearance of the assurances and supports formerly guaranteed by peasant society). In the absence of a minimum distance from economic necessity, agents cannot develop the temporal dispositions necessary for conceiving the possibility of a future pregnant with options and inviting meaningful decisions (a jobless man from the city of Constantine sums this up well: “When you are not sure of today, how can you be sure of tomorrow?”).

79. The most famous of these dilemmas is that of the “free rider” (Olson 1965). Bourdieu dissolves this problem by showing that “the objective homogenizing of group or class habitus which results from the homogeneity of conditions of existence is what enables practices to be objectively harmonized outside of any strategic computation and outside of any conscious reference to a norm, and to be mutually adjusted *in the absence of any direct interaction* and, a fortiori, of any explicit co-ordination” (Bourdieu 1990a: 58, translation modified).