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# A concise genealogy and anatomy of habitus

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## ABSTRACT

Retracing the philosophical origins and initial usage of habitus by Bourdieu to account for the historical disjuncture wrought by the Algerian war of national liberation and the postwar modernization of the French countryside allows us to clear up four recurrent misunderstandings about the concept: (1) habitus is never the replica of a single social structure but a dynamic, multiscalar, and multilayered set of schemata subject to ‘permanent revision’ in practice; (2) habitus is not necessarily coherent and unified but displays varying degrees of integration and tension; (3) because it is not always congruent with the cosmos in which it evolves, habitus is suited to analysing crisis and change no less than cohesion and perpetuation; but (4) it is not a self-sufficient mechanism for the generation of action: the dissection of dispositions must always proceed in close connection with the mapping of the system of positions that alternately excite, suppress, or redirect the socially constituted capacities and inclinations of the agent. Crucially, in Bourdieu’s hands, habitus is not an abstract concept issued from and aimed at theoretical disquisition, but a stenographic manner of designating a research posture that puts the genetic mode of thinking at the heart of social analysis.

**Keywords:** habitus, Bourdieu, embodiment, schemata, disjuncture, historicization, philosophy of consciousness

It is sometimes believed that Pierre Bourdieu is the inventor of the concept of habitus.<sup>1</sup> In fact, it is an old philosopheme, originating in the thought of Aristotle and of the medieval Scholastics, which the French sociologist retrieved and reworked after the 1960s. His aim was to forge a dispositional theory of action suited to reintroducing time and the inventive capacity of agents within structuralist anthropology, without falling back into the Cartesian intellectualism that skews subjectivist approaches to social conduct, from behaviourism and phenomenology to symbolic interactionism and rational choice theory. The notion plays a central role in Bourdieu’s lifelong effort to develop a science of practice, and a correlative critique of domination in its manifold manifestations, based on the *triple historicization* of the agent (habitus), the

world (social space and fields) and of the categories and methods of the social analyst (reflexivity).

The roots of habitus are found in Aristotle's notion of *hexis*, elaborated in his doctrine of virtue in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (c. 350 BC), meaning an acquired yet entrenched state of moral character that orients our feelings and desires, and thence our conduct (Aristotle, 1998). The term was translated into Latin as *habitus* (past participle of the verb *habere*, to have or hold) in the thirteenth century by Thomas Aquinas in his *Summa Theologiae* (1269), in which it acquired the added sense of ability for growth through activity, or durable disposition suspended mid-way between potency and purposeful action (Bourke, 1942). It was used sparingly and descriptively by sociologists of the classical generation familiar with the philosophy of the Scholastics such as Emile Durkheim (who speaks of the Christian habitus in his course on *Pedagogical Evolution in France*, 1904–5), his nephew and close collaborator Marcel Mauss (famously in the essay on 'Techniques of the Body,' 1934), as well as by Max Weber (in his discussion of religious asceticism in *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*, 1918) and Thorstein Veblen (who ruminates on the 'predatory mental habitus' of industrialists in *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, 1899).<sup>2</sup> It resurged in phenomenology, most prominently in the writings of Edmund Husserl, who designated by habitus the mental conduit between past experiences and forthcoming actions. Husserl also used as conceptual cognate the term *Habitualität*, later translated into English by his student Alfred Schutz as 'habitual knowledge' (and thence adopted by ethnomethodology), a notion that resonates with that of *habitude*, as refined by Maurice Merleau-Ponty in his treatment of the 'lived body' as the mute yet intelligent spring of social meaning and behaviour.<sup>3</sup> Habitus also figures fleetingly in the writings of another student of Husserl, Norbert Elias, who muses on 'the psychic habitus of 'civilized' people' in his classic study *Über den Process der Civilisation* (2000 [1939]).

But it is in the work of Pierre Bourdieu, who, as a keen early reader of Leibniz and Husserl, was steeped in these philosophical debates, that one finds a thorough sociological revamping of the concept designed to transcend the opposition between objectivism and subjectivism. In his hands, habitus is a *mediating construct* that helps us revoke the common-sense duality between the individual and the social by capturing 'the internalization of externality and the externalization of internality', that is, the ways in which the sociosymbolic structures of society become deposited inside persons in the form of lasting *dispositions*, or trained capacities and patterned propensities to think, feel and act in determinate ways, which in turn guide them in their creative responses to the constraints and solicitations of their extant milieu.<sup>4</sup>

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Bourdieu first reintroduced the notion denotatively in his youthful field studies of the nexus of honour, kinship and power in the peasant society of his native

Béarn in south-western France and in the Berber-speaking Kabyle settlements of colonial Algeria. In both settings, he activated habitus to capture the *discordance* between the culturally given capacities and proclivities of people and the requirements of the emerging social system, leading to historical rupture and societal upheaval – belying what would later become the rote academic tale of Bourdieu the apostle of ‘reproduction theory’ (Wacquant, 2004a). On the Béarn side, the greater ability of local girls to incorporate urban values conveyed by the school and mass media consigned the local men to bachelorhood and thence the village society based on male primogeniture to a slow death; on the Algerian side, uprooted *fellahin* bore within them a contradictory mix of categories inherited from ancestral tradition and imported by colonization, and this ‘cultural sabir’ (or split habitus) made them misfits in both the agrarian community and the urban economy, living supports of structural contradictions that propelled the country toward revolution (Bourdieu, 2004 [1962]; Bourdieu and Sayad, 2004 [1964]).

Bourdieu then elaborated habitus analytically at the turn of the 1970s through a dual critique of Sartre’s phenomenology and Lévi-Strauss’s structuralism in his *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (1972). In this and subsequent writings, culminating a quarter-century later in *Pascalian Meditations* (Bourdieu, 1997), he proposes that practice is neither the mechanical precipitate of structural dictates nor the spawn of the intentional pursuit of goals by individuals, but rather

the product of a dialectical relationship between a situation and a habitus, understood as a system of durable and transposable dispositions which, integrating all past experiences, functions at every moment as a *matrix of perceptions, appreciations, and actions*, and makes it possible to accomplish infinitely differentiated tasks, thanks to the analogical transfer of schemata acquired in prior practice. (Bourdieu, 1972: 261)

As individual and group history sedimented in the body, social structure turned mental structure and sensorimotor engine, habitus may be thought of by analogy to Noam Chomsky’s ‘generative grammar’, which enables speakers proficient in a given language to produce proper speech acts unthinkingly according to shared rules in inventive yet predictable ways (Chomsky, 1966). It designates a practical competency, acquired *in and for* action, that operates beneath the level of consciousness and is continually honed in the very movement of its deployment. But, unlike Chomsky’s grammar, (i) habitus encapsulates not a natural but a *social* aptitude which is for this very reason variable across time, place, and most importantly, across distributions of power; (ii) it is *transferable* to various domains of practice, which explains the rough coherence that obtains, for instance, across realms of consumption – in music, sports, food and furniture, but also in marital and political choices – within and amongst individuals of the same class and grounds their distinctive lifestyles (Bourdieu, 1979); (iii) it is enduring but *not static or eternal*: dispositions are socially mounted and can be eroded, countered or even dismantled by exposure to novel external forces, as demonstrated by situations of migration and specialized training;

(iv) yet it is endowed with *built-in inertia*, insofar as habitus tends to produce practices patterned after the social structures that generated them, and because each of its layers operates as a prism through which later experiences are filtered and subsequent strata of dispositions overlaid (thus the disproportionate weight of the schemata implanted in infancy, among which the binary opposition between masculine and feminine); (v) habitus thus introduces a *lag*, and sometimes a hiatus, between the past determinations that produced it and the current determinations that interpellate it:

As history made nature, [habitus] is what confers upon practices their relative autonomy with respect to the external determinations of the immediate present. This autonomy is that of the past, enacted and acting, which, functioning as accumulated capital, produces history on the basis of history and so ensures that permanence within change that makes the individual agent a world within the world. (Bourdieu, 1980a: 56)

Against structuralism, then, the theory of habitus acknowledges that agents actively make the social world by engaging embodied instruments of cognitive construction; but it also insists, against constructivism, that these instruments are themselves made by the social world through the somatization of social relations. The situated individual ‘determines herself insofar as she constructs the situation that determines her’, but ‘she has not chosen the principle of her choice’, such that ‘habitus contributes to transforming that which transforms it’ (Bourdieu, 1997: 177).

Habitus supplies at once a principle of sociation and individuation: *sociation* because our categories of judgment, sensibility and conduct, coming from society, are shared by all those who were subjected to similar social conditions and conditionings (thus one can speak of a masculine habitus, a bourgeois habitus, a national habitus, etc., corresponding to the major social ‘principles of vision and division’, but also of an artistic habitus, a juridical habitus, a carceral habitus, etc., corresponding to specific institutions); *individuation* insofar as each person, by virtue of having a unique trajectory and location in the world, internalizes a matchless combination of such schemata (even identical twins are separated by their order of birth and treated differently by their parents and others). Because it is both *structu-red* (by past social milieus) and *structu-ring* (of present perceptions, emotions and actions), habitus operates as the ‘unchosen principle of all choices’ guiding practices that assume the systematic character of strategies even though they are not the result of strategic intention and are objectively ‘orchestrated without being the product of the organizing activity of a conductor’ (Bourdieu, 1980a: 256). As a *multi-scalar construct*, habitus enables us to mate the study of the generic, capturing constituents shared across concentric circles of conditioning, with a focus on the specific, as it paves the way for a clinical sociology capable of entering into the depths of a given biohistory without reducing it to idiosyncrasies.

For this dispositional philosophy of action, in which ‘the socialized body is not opposed to society’ but constitutes ‘one of the forms of its existence’

(Bourdieu, 1980a: 29), the social actor is neither the isolated, egoistic individual of neoclassical economic theory, a computing machine seeking to maximize utility in pursuit of clear goals, nor a disincarnated manipulator of symbols somehow suspended above the pull of material forces as in the neo-Kantian tradition of symbolic anthropology and the neo-pragmatist strand of Meadian interactionism. (Beyond their vitriolic opposition on the question of the ultimate supremacy of interest versus culture, these two conceptions of conduct, the rational actor and the symbolic animal, are equally spontaneist, instantaneist, and intellectualist.) She is instead a sentient being of flesh and blood inhabited by historical necessity who is enmeshed in the world by an opaque relationship of ‘ontological complicity’ – or enmity, as the case may be – and who is bound to others from within through the ‘implicit collusion’ fostered by shared categories of perception, appreciation and action (Bourdieu, 1997: 163).

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Retracing the philosophical origins and initial usage of habitus by Bourdieu to account for the historical disjuncture wrought by the Algerian war of national liberation and the postwar modernization of the French countryside allows us to clear up four recurrent misunderstandings about the concept.

First, habitus is never the replica of a single social structure since it is a *multilayered and dynamic set of schemata* that records, stores, and prolongs the influence of the diverse environments successively traversed during one’s existence. It follows that

[a] genuine sociogenesis of the dispositions constitutive of habitus should strive to understand how the social order captures, channels, reinforces or thwarts psychic processes, depending on whether there is homology, redundancy or, on the contrary, contradiction and tension between the two logics. It goes without saying that mental structures are not the mere reflex of social structures. (Bourdieu, 1993: 717)

The malleability of habitus due to its ‘permanent revision’ in practice is further spotlighted by Bourdieu’s cardinal distinction, broached in his early research on education, gender and class (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1970), and dramatized by this author’s learning of the categories, skills and desires of the pugilist (Wacquant, 2004b), between the *primary habitus*, acquired in early childhood through osmosis in the familial microcosm and its extensions, and the *secondary habitus*, grafted later onto the latter by the specialized pedagogical labour of the school and other didactic institutions (a boxing gym, a painter’s studio, a religious sect, a political party, etc.). The result is a compromise formation that dynamically articulates generic and specific dispositions across the life cycle into an operative set of schemata.<sup>5</sup>

It follows, second, that habitus is *not necessarily coherent and unified*. Rather, it displays varying degrees of integration and tension, depending on the character and compatibility of the social situations that fashioned it over time. A sequence of congruent institutions and stable microcosms will tend to fashion

a cohesive habitus whose successive layers reinforce one another and work in unison. Dissimilar organizations anchored by divergent values or entropic universes, by contrast, cultivate unstable systems of dispositions divided against themselves and wont to generate irregular and inconsistent lines of action. Thus a broken or splintered habitus was common among the Algerian subproletarians studied by Bourdieu in the early 1960s as it was among the members of the precariat of Chicago's hyperghetto.<sup>6</sup>

Third, habitus is no less *suited to analysing crisis and change*, across multiple scales ranging from the individual to the largest macrocosm, than it is cohesion and perpetuation. This is because habitus does not necessarily agree with the social world in which it evolves. Bourdieu warns repeatedly that one must 'avoid unconsciously universalizing the model of the quasi-circular relation of near-perfect reproduction that is completely valid only in the case where the conditions of production of habitus are identical or homologous to its conditions of functioning' (Bourdieu, 1980a: 62–63). That habitus can 'misfire' and have 'critical moments of perplexity and discrepancy' when it is incapable of generating practices conforming to the milieu constitutes a major spring of personal resistance, social innovation and structural transformation (Bourdieu, 1997: 191).<sup>7</sup>

Last and not least, it should be stressed that habitus is not a self-sufficient mechanism for the generation of action: like a spring, it needs an external trigger and so it cannot be considered in isolation from the definite social worlds (and eventually fields) within which it operates. Moreover, the same habitus will yield different lines of conduct when called out by different strategic opportunities. The dissection of dispositions must thus proceed in close connection with the mapping of the system of positions that alternately excite, suppress, or redirect the inclinations of the agent. This two-way, dynamic, *mutual gearing of embodied and objectified social structures* is yet another source of potential transformation of both person and cosmos:

When the objective conditions of its accomplishment are not given, a habitus continuously thwarted by the situation can be the site of explosive forces (as with resentment) that may await (nay look out for) the opportunity to exercise themselves and express themselves as soon as those objective conditions are offered (e.g., the position of a petty boss) . . . . In reaction against instantaneous mechanicalism, one is led to stress the 'assimilative' capacities of habitus, but habitus is also adaptation: it constantly performs an adjustment to the world that only exceptionally takes the form of radical conversion. (Bourdieu, 1980b: 135–136)

A full accounting of practice thus requires a triple coordinated elucidation of the social genesis and structures of habitus as historicized subjectivity, of the formation and dynamics of social space as a historical distribution of possibles (which, in certain limiting cases, assumes the form of a field), and of the situated specifics of their confrontation in the microdialectic of dispositions and positions.

Although philosophers such as John Searle (1992), Jacques Bouveresse (1995), Charles Taylor (1999) and Iris Marion Young (2005) have discussed

Bourdieu's elaboration of habitus in relation to the philosophy of mind, language and self, and neurobiologist Jean-Pierre Changeux (2004) has connected it to current developments in brain research grounding it in our synaptic architecture, it bears stressing that for Bourdieu the notion is not an abstract concept issued from and aimed at theoretical disquisition; it is first and foremost a stenographic manner of designating a *research posture*. Habitus puts at the heart of social analysis the genetic mode of thinking as it directs us to excavate the implicit cognitive, conative and emotive constructs through which persons navigate social space and animate their lived world. For the assembly and deployment of the socially constituted schemata that make an adept and appetitive agent are fully accessible to methodical observation and analytic parsing. Ultimately, the proof of the theoretical pudding of habitus must consist in its empirical eating.

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## Notes

- 1 This is asserted, for instance, by Hans Joas and Wolfgang Knöbl in their otherwise authoritative, *Social Theory: Twenty Introductory Lectures* (2009).
- 2 See Durkheim (1990), Mauss (1973), Weber (1963) and Veblen (2009).
- 3 See Husserl (1975), Schutz (1973–89) and Merleau-Ponty (1962).
- 4 A lucid discussion of the ontological and epistemic status of dispositions as constituents of mind and matter, and whether they can anchor causal or functional explanations, is Mumford (2003); for a broader panorama, Damschen *et al.* (2009).
- 5 An exemplary study of the grafting of the generic (country-masculine) and specific (organizational) components of a concrete habitus is Desmond (2007); for a discussion of the analytic implications of the declension of 'generations' of habitus, see Wacquant (2014).
- 6 Bourdieu (1977), and Wacquant (1998). See also Bourdieu's dissection of the 'cleft habitus' of Édouard Manet that 'synthesized opposites', a conformist bourgeois side and a rebellious artsy side, and whose 'astounding tension' propelled his artistic innovation (2014: 454–463 and 648–651).
- 7 This implies that there is no need to 'supplement' the theory of habitus to cover 'creative action' by contrast to reproduction (Joas, 1997), to capture the multiplicity of temporalities and structures (Sewell, 2005: ch. 4), or to rediscover the 'acting subject' alive to hidden historical possibilities (Ortner, 2006).

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