

For Bourdieu, Against Alexander: Reality and Reduction

GARRY POTTER

INTRODUCTION

Reductionist. Determinist. Economic determinist. These are among the most potent labels in the philosophical and sociological polemicist's pejorative lexicon. They cut to the heart of sociology's historically long standing problematics concerning structure, agency and social action. They indicate not only theoretical error but fundamental theoretical error. They apparently indicate errors long since diagnosed and understood by disciplines which have emerged from some of their earlier confusions and moved on in terms of both empirical research and theory. These terms, I believe, would be a crude but nonetheless fair summary, of the essence of Jeffrey Alexander's critique of the life work, to date, of Pierre Bourdieu. As the title of this article indicates, I believe this critique to be mistaken. However, it is mistaken in a very interesting way. It demonstrates the need to re-conceptualize what is meant by both reductionism and determinism. It demonstrates both the importance of meta-theory and how meta-theoretical error can obfuscate our understanding of important substantive achievements. Alexander and I are agreed that Bourdieu's work is implicitly realist (Bourdieu himself does not engage with such meta-theory directly). Crudely put, the argument to be advanced is that Alexander's "anti-realist" philosophical presuppositions prevent his understanding of Bourdieu's achievements; and that a critical realist (social scientific realism) position allows us to correctly understand the dialectical relationship between the different levels of a complex structured reality which his work illuminates.

Alexander's critique of Bourdieu is principally to be found in "The Reality of Reduction", the longest of the four essays comprising his (relatively) recent book *Fin de Siècle Social Theory: Relativism, Reduction and the Problem of Reason* (1995a—also published in reduced form—1995b). His critical attack engages Bourdieu's work both in depth and breadth, looking not only at his theoretical writings but also at the manner in which Bourdieu's concepts are put to work in multi-various

empirical studies. The essay is impressive not only for its own breadth and depth of scholarship, but for its extreme clarity in the synopsis of Bourdieu's ideas and in the expression of Alexander's own theoretical abstractions and chains of reasoning. The critical content of Alexander's analysis is paradoxical however. It is accurate and penetrating; in some respects I would argue it is irrefutable. Yet on another level, Alexander has utterly failed to comprehend what Bourdieu has accomplished, the true significance of his work. For it is on the level of Bourdieu's profoundest insights that Alexander adjudges his work a failure.

Alexander's essay quotes extensively from Bourdieu's work and I shall endeavor in this article (with only a couple of exceptions) to use only such quotations as were used by him. There are two reasons for this. First, I believe he made quite a reasonable selection of quotations both to illustrate his own critical argument and also to synopsis Bourdieu's work. His relatively minor point that Bourdieu does have a tendency to repeat himself is one which I have no quarrel with. My second reason is far more interesting. Alexander's misunderstandings of Bourdieu have nothing to do with scholarship. Had he made a different selection of quotations he would have arrived at the same conclusions. Let me repeat myself: Alexander has utterly failed to comprehend what Bourdieu has accomplished! There is a measure of irony running through both Alexander's critique of Bourdieu and my counter-critique. In my case the irony derives from the large measure of agreement I have with Alexander. Bourdieu is a reductionist. Bourdieu is a determinist. The irony in Alexander's case, is that the resolution of his misunderstandings of Bourdieu are all right before his nose. Yes, he quotes from Bourdieu extensively in his essay; but if he only read these quotations in a different light . . . if only he properly understood reduction and determination. Where Alexander sees logical contradiction and over-simplifications I see the substantive depiction of an ontologically stratified complex reality explained dialectically.

Alexander suggests that Bourdieu is implicitly a meta-theoretical realist. I agree. I will argue that the critical realist meta-theoretical solution to the sociological problematics of structure, agency and social action (as exemplified in the work of Roy Bhaskar and others) is implicitly applied in Bourdieu's substantive research and theory, specifically in his utilization of the concepts of habitus and field. It will argue that the related functioning of these concepts specifically depicts the mechanisms whereby individual choices and actions are imbricated in the broader processes of structural causality. Thus, in essence I will be arguing that though Bourdieu's achievements are widely acclaimed, their scope has yet to be fully appreciated. The critical realist understanding of the relationship between social structure and action (in the abstract) is in effect concretized by Bourdieu's substantive work.

Critical realism offers us a transformational model of society, of social structure. It offers us a relational model of social structure, which posits it as being no less real for its relationality. It is simply a different sort of "thing" from human beings with its own "determining" causal powers. Human beings also possess causal

powers. They possess self-reflexivity and decision making capacity. Thus the philosophical clichés of “free will versus determinism” are transcended. Such conceptions take us nowhere. Determination is something to be investigated sociologically rather than logically contrasted with freedom. Bourdieu (1993, p. 25) expresses the proper perspective upon this issue for a sociologist thus:

The degree to which the social world seems to us to be determined depends on the knowledge we have of it. On the other hand, the degree to which the world is really determined is not a question of opinion; as a sociologist it is not for me to be “for determinism” or “for freedom” but to discover necessity if it exists, in the places where it is.

The problem for Alexander is that Bourdieu does “discover necessity”, at the same time as he refers to agency, knowledge and decision making. Ergo, a logical contradiction. Further, some of this “necessity” derives from the agent’s initial class position. Ergo, the worst form of determinism: economic determinism. There is thus an apparently strong argument here. Do Bourdieu’s analyses produce logical contradictions? They do if one possesses certain understandings of the relationship between structure and agency and the usual understandings of the word “determined”. But Bourdieu, does not conceive of these relationships in such a fashion and determination does not possess for him the meaning it does for Alexander (and many others, of course). To properly understand that meaning a richer ontology of social reality is required. What Alexander posits as a logical contradiction of argument, is in fact merely a complex reality which manifests itself in the form of contradictory processes simultaneously at work upon different levels. The mistake is simple but Alexander is not alone in making it. Present discursive realities make it difficult to comprehend how it could be avoided; in other words they make it difficult to comprehend how “determinism” might be conceptualized differently.

Curiously enough Alexander gets to the very heart of this problem without realizing it, almost, as it were, incidentally. He asserts that Bourdieu is implicitly a realist. Where everywhere else one finds a multiplicity of citations and authoritative reference one finds in his reference to realism only a single dismissive footnote:

In terms of recent disputes in Anglo-American discussions in epistemology, Bourdieu is adopting a “realist” position, which is typically presented as differentiated not only from a relativist position but from a positivist one that is supposedly content with a surface law-like descriptions of the visible surface of the social rather than seeking to explain deeper, less visible structures, in a supposedly more radical way. This distinction, typically advanced by the very authors who call themselves realist, is a fuzzy one, however; it conflates epistemological claims—generally valid ones—with ontological and moral issues about the particular nature of the social world. (Alexander 1995a note 40 p. 210)

Alexander is quite correct that realism presents itself as differentiated from both relativist and positivist positions; and it is certainly not content with “law-like

descriptions of the visible surface of the social". It does indeed seek to explain deeper structures. This is, of course, precisely what I would argue that Bourdieu has, in fact, accomplished. Alexander's assertion that realism "conflates epistemological claims with ontological and moral issues about the particular nature of the social world" would be hard to contest textually as he offers no supportive argument for the assertion; nor does he reference the work of any particular authors. Presumably he has in mind people such as Roy Bhaskar, Andrew Collier or Margaret Archer but I will leave it to their readerships to decide for themselves whether in fact they make such errors; personally I don't believe so. However, I also believe that this is precisely the ground upon which Alexander fundamentally misunderstands Bourdieu, precisely the ground upon which the necessity for re-thinking the notion of determination becomes apparent.

REDUCTIONISM

Before moving to consider the issue of determination let us consider Alexander's claim that Bourdieu's work is reductionist. Reductionism is what Alexander adjudges to be one of the two profoundly flawed responses to what he propounds as a generalized crisis of reason, the other being relativism. In fact the two responses as he diagnoses them, can be seen to be closely related both in terms of historical genesis and theoretical consequence.

Relativism commits the epistemological fallacy, arguing from the presence of subjectivity in reasoning to the absence in reasoning of any universal scope. Reductionism commits the sociological fallacy, arguing from the social sources of ideas to the absence in ideas of anything other than their social source. (Alexander 1995a p. 3)

One can readily see the sociological fallacy as the unfortunate historical legacy of epistemological misunderstandings and mistaken reasoning in the sociology of knowledge, a special sort of epistemological relativism and the epistemological fallacy as it were. I agree with Alexander that both fallacies are intellectually incoherent and of unfortunate moral and social consequence as well. Where I do not agree with him, is in the interpretation of Bourdieu's work such that he is guilty of these sins.

It is quite true, that Bourdieu pours scorn upon the allegedly radicalizing effects upon students of sixties sociology teaching (Bourdieu 1977b). Such radicalism was to be understood, he argued, less in terms of the revolutionary content of university syllabi and more in terms of the wider phenomenon of social class reproduction and structural changes in the economy. It is also true that after his sociological analyses of the operation of material interests at work in the cultural sphere (Bourdieu 1984) he was asked what his own tastes in art were and replied "... that my tastes are those appropriate to my class" (Bourdieu 1993). But this should be taken, not as a demonstration of the sociological fallacy at work in the

field of artistic taste; rather it should be seen as a reminder of Alexander's concession that Bourdieu is "... always très amusant" and that postmodernists possess no monopoly upon irony.

With respect to ideas, Bourdieu's emphasis is always sociological. One could simply say that's his job. But it is not the case that he would reduce ideas to their social source. Indeed his stated views on science and sociology repudiate any such notion. Sociology for Bourdieu is a dangerous discipline. It is dangerous because of its implicit threat to the status quo and the threat it poses is the threat of knowledge, knowledge in the service of human emancipation! The manner in which sociology poses this threat most effectively, he argues, is through the very exercise of a rigorous objectivity of its scientificity (Bourdieu 1993).

That Bourdieu's work frequently attacks intellectuals' over-estimation of the uniqueness, original genesis, self sufficiency and power of their prognostications (often involving what could be called a sociology of sociology) does not necessarily commit him to the sociological fallacy. Surely Alexander would not insist that a sociology of knowledge *necessarily* generates this error. Rather I would say that while there are no philosopher kings in Bourdieu's theoretical universe, there is nonetheless considerable respect for theoretical autonomy and the social efficacy of knowledge. His own life work and the spirit in which it was carried out should be testimony to that.

However, there are still substantive charges to be rebutted which arise from Alexander's critique. And these are of such a fundamental nature that Bourdieu's defense requires a re-thinking of some extremely important yet discursively reified notions, such notions as are (in spite of the rhetoric above) signified (correctly) by the powerfully loaded labels of reductionism and determinism. Alexander in critiquing Bourdieu as a reductionist commits a reduction of his own. What he says of the sociological fallacy, its inherent incoherence, and other negative consequences, is certainly true; but he forgets that there are other quite valid analytical purposes in utilizing a "reductive" technique.

The notion of interest . . . was conceived of as an instrument of rupture intended to bring the materialist mode of questioning to bear on realms from which it was absent and on the sphere of cultural production in particular. It is the means of a deliberate (and provisional) reductionism. (Bourdieu 1988b quoted in Alexander 1995a p. 159—my italics)

Reduction can work to a purpose. It can reveal much that is obscured by the sheer complexity of reality. In spheres that are analyzed as possessing relative autonomy it must not be forgotten, of course, that when the relative nature of that autonomy is stressed and analyzed, the "autonomy" of the phenomenon still remains. I don't believe that Bourdieu forgets this. The demonstration of the working of material interests, whether in the fields of cultural production and reproduction, or knowledge production and reproduction, does not abolish the relatively autonomous integrity of either art or ideas.

ECONOMIC DETERMINISM

According to Alexander, Bourdieu's reductionism is of the worst order. It constitutes an implicit (as well as frequently explicit) economic determinism. He marshals an array of quotations to demonstrate this, of which the following is perhaps only the one which makes it most obvious.

Without ever being totally coordinated, since they are the product of "causal series" characterized by different structural durations, the dispositions and the situations which combine synchronically to constitute a determined conjuncture are never wholly independent, since they are engendered by the objective structures, that is, in the last analysis, by the economic bases of the social formation in question. (Bourdieu, 1977a p. 83 quoted by Alexander, 1995 pp. 148–149)

From Alexander's perspective, Bourdieu's thinking, though evolving through distinct stages and modifications of conceptual framework (see Alexander 1995 appendix), can be classified as fundamentally neo-Marxist. Worse still, in contradiction with Bourdieu's explicit criticisms of Marxism, and most particularly Althusserian Marxism, it is precisely such, that he can most significantly be understood as being himself. Alexander, however, is far too good a theorist to rest with any simple formulaic denunciation: Marxist, Althusserian—ergo outmoded, intellectually discredited. He recognizes the complexity and innovation of Bourdieu's theoretical analyses and empirical studies. But, however elaborate, sophisticated, empirically informed and innovative the work may be, for which virtues he gives deserved applause; reduction is reduction—a fundamental error which manifests itself throughout Bourdieu's work.

I concur with Alexander's classification of Bourdieu as a neo-Marxist. I too, can detect Althusserian inclinations within his work. I can also see a Durkheimian and Parsonian drift to his thought. And while Bourdieu often places a great deal of emphasis upon the initial class position of an agent in the formation of habitus, class position in this context seems a more Weberian than Marxist notion. In at least one respect though, such classifications are irrelevant. If Bourdieu has in fact successfully resolved a long standing dilemma central to the history of Marxist thought, then it matters little under which flag he chooses to represent his ideas¹. In fact quite frequently, the (intellectual) reasons given for jettisoning further serious consideration of Marxism, focus precisely upon the history of its failure in terms of inconsistent and unconvincing qualifications of economic determinism. Given the historically constituted discursive constellations of the relevant disciplines, perhaps it is even the case, that the solution, to what historically was most precisely formulated as a specifically Marxist problematic (but one which nonetheless crops up indirectly in a variety of guises virtually everywhere else in the social sciences) could only be articulated in new (non-Marxist) language.

Be that as may be, and leaving aside the socio-political and other reasons for Marxism's waning star in social scientific discourse, the problematic itself, that to which generations of Marxists propounded various (non)solutions, remains of compelling interest. The nature, effects, extent and complicated modes of functioning of the causal forces of the economic sphere upon other spheres of social life, must always be a central problem for the social sciences. So too must be the attempt to find a better way of engaging with the complexity of the reality underlying the worn out philosophical clichés concerning free will and determinism. Bourdieu has provided a new sort of answer to these problematics.

He has propounded a new way of theorizing, and empirically researching, what was signified in Marxist discourse as "economic determination . . . in the last instance"; or as he himself put it in the above quotation "in the last analysis". The important question is really whether or not Bourdieu's theoretical framework for doing so is reductive or not. Or rather, because on one level at least, Alexander is clearly correct on this point as well, the fundamental questions concerning the nature of "reductionism" and "determinism" must be re-examined, as to whether they do or don't engender the sorts of pre-suppositional error Alexander believes they do.

The language of the above quotation—"engendered by the objective structures . . . the economic base of the social formation"—certainly sounds like the sort of determinism with which we have long been familiar. Determinism is determinism and reduction is reduction. But is that all there is to it?

The language of the earlier portion of the quotation has a very different resonance: "without ever being totally coordinated", "the product of causal series", "different structural durations", "dispositions", "situations", "combine synchronically". The juxtaposition of these terms and phrases, introduces some very complex qualification into an apparently straight forward expression of economic determinism. The complexity of this phraseology can easily be underestimated. For example, causal series of different structural durations combining synchronically, could seem a rather strange notion. Synchronic notions of structure must be understood as being on a different level of epistemological abstraction than products of causal series. Synchrony does not possess duration for a start. Very well then, this theoretically multi-leveled diachronic/synchronic "referent" is itself, as he says, a "determined conjuncture". Conjuncture of what? Of events? Of structure? Both? And it (the ontological questions pertaining to this "it" are themselves profound) he also says is "never wholly independent". This last phrase would seem to indicate a relative autonomy at least. The conjuncture is not wholly independent because it is engendered by the existence and logic of an objective structure; to wit, the economic base of the social formation.

Bourdieu is attempting such a multi-leveled description of the complex inter-action and determination of causal mechanisms as to warrant, at least the possibility, that the very understanding, hitherto maintained by philosophers of something "determining" something else, has been transcended. It is this

possibility which Alexander seems to have missed. Let us examine this possibility more closely through a consideration of Bourdieu's concepts of capital, field and habitus..

HABITUS, FIELD AND CAPITAL

Bourdieu does not simply demonstrate the complexity of interaction and point out the multiplicity of explanatory considerations. He prioritizes amongst them. This prioritization is itself a form of reduction. Alexander is quite correct in understanding Bourdieu's utilization of such terms as cultural, linguistic, scientific (etc. etc.) capital, as being more than merely metaphoric and heuristic. Cultural capital is not the same as economic capital; the conversion from one form of capital to another is not straight forward. But it is possible. Further, the structural linkage of the economic sphere to domains of social life most seemingly far removed from it remains. This linkage is not readily apparent or to be found upon the surface. But Bourdieu has shown us how economic determinations are at work in the complex structural linkages between the various fields insofar as they causally affect the manner in which individuals act and make their choices.

As Bourdieu demonstrates with his various empirical works, the "artistic field" and the "educational field", for example, each functions according to their own very specific logics. The strategic game of taste's "distinctions" (if one can pardon the pun) are differently allocated than the "distinctions" awarded in the academic world. The successful and unsuccessful strategies employed by the various actors, which combine to form the logic of each field, are different. They are, however, similar; hence the concept of homologous fields and the repeated employment of the term "capital". But "linguistic capital" is not identical to "scientific capital". Science, for example, is a game with its own very specific rules, including the "rules" which govern who gets to play it at all.

Yet Alexander is correct when he asserts that the homologous relationship between "fields" is more than mere homology². Bourdieu gives us an explanation for the similarities between the quite specific logics governing the diverse fields he investigates and the utilization of the term capital is the key to it. There is a kind of reduction of these specific logics to the logic of economy. However, in this kind of reduction, the various fields do not lose their specificity. They are their own unique and specific manifestations of relative autonomy; in which the manifestations and conflicts of material interests (the logic of the economy) are differently embedded within quite unique domains. That is, material interests are embedded in the rules and rewards, in the criteria for success and failure, in the range of possible strategies, and in the possible intended and unintended consequences of action; but they are embedded in very particular ways. It is all of this which together form the logic of the specific field in question.

Neither is Bourdieu's "reduction", if such it may be correctly called, an attempt to explain complex phenomena in terms of a single cause. The economic (or rather to be more specific, the initial class position of agents) is not simply a first cause in a chain of linear causality. The mutual interactivity, the chain of displacements, transformations, mediations etc. etc. are in fact the very things Bourdieu is always attempting to explain in detail empirically. Further he is attempting to do so simultaneously through a synchronic analysis of positional relations and the dialectical movement between this and the diachronic interactions just mentioned above.

But again, so Alexander would say, reduction is reduction. He is aware of both Bourdieu's complexity and innovation. But reduction, however complicated its framing, constitutes for Alexander such a fundamental error, that, *a priori*, one can conclude that other errors, contradictions etc. (and ones of profound consequence) will inevitably follow.

The most damning contradiction which Alexander identifies is to be found within what is perhaps Bourdieu's most important concept—habitus. The way it behaves, produces in Bourdieu's theory of practical action, what Alexander labels the "oxymoron of unconscious strategization"³. Habitus is such an important concept for Bourdieu, forming the bridge, as it were, between a theory of structure and a theory of action; it is seen as so fundamentally entailing the very incoherence Alexander associates with "reductionism" that I will stake the bulk of the remainder of this article in defending its logical integrity.

HABITUS: INSIGHT OR OXYMORON?

Habitus, for Bourdieu, is perhaps the central concept in his theory of practice (or practical action). Habitus consists of a system "of structured, and structuring practices" (Bourdieu 1990 p. 52) which are literally embodied in the agent as a set of objective but internalized pre-dispositions relative to strategic action. However, "capital" (linguistic capital, cultural capital, scientific capital etc.) and "field" are integrally related concepts, reinforcing and refining (respectively) the theory of practical action as it was developed.

Agents engage in strategic calculations and make choices within the limitations of the rules of the various fields. However, such "rules" are, in part, themselves a cumulative result of other agents' pre-dispositions, calculations, choices and actions, as well as the agents' awareness of such. Also, agent strategization takes place on more than one level. There is the entirely conscious process of rational calculation. Then there is the causally affecting disruption of this purely rational calculation—the unconscious pre-dispositions of the agent. Finally there is the underlying logic of the field itself, in which agents unconsciously function *as if* the decisions made, and actions taken, possessed another goal—the reproduction of the field itself and the preservation of its operational logic.

This last level, of course, is one of unintended consequences from the point of view of the individual agent. Thus, for Alexander, to refer to it in terms of strategy is profoundly misleading. "As if" are the words frequently used by Bourdieu in such contexts and Alexander makes much of his use of this phraseology. We do not, for example, consciously pursue strategies designed to reproduce the status quo of class relations and its legitimization. But such may be, and Bourdieu would assert, frequently is, the cumulative unintended consequence of our choices and actions. There are reasons why this is so, deriving from the relationship between the opportunities afforded by, and the socialization associated with, initial class positions and the material interests embedded in the various fields. There is a logic to the actions and consequences (both intended and unintended) which is not merely contingent. This thus gives considerable explanatory potency to Bourdieu's "as if" semantic choice.

All the different levels of choice, determinations and strategy are interrelated. The unintended system reproductive consequences are organized in a particular fashion. There is a strategic logic involved in the linkage between the intentions of individual agents and the collective achievement of their actions quite outside of, and often completely irrelevant to, those intentions. That is, their very logics are related.

That agents might appear to be acting as if they possessed the conscious collective goal of system reproduction, is not accidental. It is not accidental because the initial class position of the agents engenders a habitus. The unconscious complex of causal forces (determinants?) correspondent to particular class positions, ensures that sufficient number (because this is a matter of probabilities rather than absolutes) of individual agents, each pursuing their own individual aims, will pursue them in particular ways. Their strategies, successful or unsuccessful, more or less rationally calculated, result in the unintended consequence of a reproduction of pre-existing class relations.

However, the engendering of habitus, though resultant in unconscious pre-dispositions, is not devoid of rational calculation. That a large number of agents might maintain, for example, "that such and such (a career in law perhaps) is "not for the likes of us" may well be quite a realistic assessment of probabilities and opportunities, again, more or less rationally calculated. We are, as Bourdieu frequently stresses, dealing with agents capable of both rational calculation and self reflexivity after all. Further the transposition, between a reasonably arrived at belief shared by a collectivity of agents, to an unconscious set of pre-dispositions operative in an individual agent and affecting his conscious choices and calculations, is not a once and forever moment, but is reinforced in countless ways over a career and a lifetime of conscious choices in a variety of different milieu.

But if one asserts that "pre-dispositions" are "determined" by one's socio-economic status, even if only "in the last analysis", the exercise of "strategic" decisions and the manifestation of practical actions within any particular "field"

(regardless of the specific logic of that field) are also thereby “reduced” to economic determination. On this Alexander and I are agreed. But for him this “reduction” has the effect of rendering all complexity, the logics of the particular fields, for example, irrelevant. And perhaps this would be a valid conclusion if the only way of understanding determination was, as it were, absolutely. However, given an ontology of structured depth and levels whereby different causal processes are at work within different temporal frameworks, determination becomes a much more complex notion.

It is worth quoting Alexander, quoting Bourdieu, at some length here, because, as suggested earlier, he has everything he needs to understand Bourdieu right in front of him. He merely draws the wrong conclusions.

Bourdieu is caught in a dilemma that he does not face and cannot resolve. Because of this he is forced to make the incongruous suggestion that strategization, which is omnipresent, proceeds largely in an unconscious way (e.g. OTP:36; HA:94). What he is objecting to about rational actor theory is not its insistence on rationality but its association of rationality with an “intention” of “consciousness” (LOP:50), an association which in his view makes it not only naive but restrictively economic. Economistic rational choice theory suggests that either ends are “consciously posited” (ibid.) or that economic reasoning is conscious and prior to the act. The result is that economics is “unaware that practices can have other principles than mechanical causes or conscious ends”. The alternative, according to Bourdieu, is to recognize that practices “can obey an economic logic without obeying narrowly economic interests”. Reason can, indeed, be seen as “immanent in practices,” but it is not located in “decisions”, that is, in the claim that choices are made in a manner that is consciously calculated. Yet neither does the rationality of action emerge from the “determinations of mechanisms external to and superior to the agents”. Action is reasonable and rational because without conscious calculation, it remains structured by the need to “achieve the objectives inscribed in the logic of particular field(s) at the lowest cost” (ibid.). It can be described as consistent with “genuinely intentional strategies” even “when it is in no way inspired by [any] conscious concern” (D:246). Action, then, is “reasonable without being the product of reasoned design”, informed by an “objective finality” without being actually determined mechanistically, “intelligible and coherent” without involving intelligent, coherent and deliberate decisions, and “adjusted to the future” without being oriented to a projection or plan (LOP:50–51). (Alexander 1995 p. 154)

Though his above quotations of Bourdieu are selected from a variety of contexts, I do not believe, except for one important exception which I will come back to in a moment, that in utilizing them, Alexander is distorting Bourdieu’s thinking. He just *doesn’t get it!* Instead, immediately after writing the preceding sentences he exclaims sarcastically: “What an extraordinarily supple concept Bourdieu’s of conception of practical action is!” (ibid.). But that is just it; indeed it is!

The suppleness of his concept of practical action involves different levels of understanding correspondent to different levels of reality. Alexander does not seem to recognize this possibility. Rather, any notion of “level” for him, seems to be wholly an epistemological possibility. The notion of ontological depth and stratification is seemingly alien to his way of thinking. The same action cannot be rational and non-rational at the same time. Neither can it be conscious and

unconscious simultaneously. This reasoning Alexander insists “. . . violates not only theoretical logic but simple common sense” (1995 p. 155).

The above conclusion, if correct, would be not merely a telling blow against Bourdieu, but a fatal one. However, it not only seriously misses its mark, but it does so in a quite an unintentionally ironic fashion. Alexander would be the last to dispute the necessity for the development of theoretical logics which transcend the banality of (mis)understanding reliant upon “simple common sense”. The immediately discernible logical contradictions apparently pinpointed by “common sense”, frequently turn out only to be just that—“apparent”. The real question is whether or not Bourdieu has successfully developed a theoretical understanding whereby such is the case or not. The apparent logical contradictions of Bourdieu’s analysis do not in fact “violate theoretical logic”; it is only that Alexander has failed to understand it, seemingly blinkered by his own “common sense”.

For Alexander, “determines” implies an absolute. If agents’ actions are determined then decision is an illusion. But for Bourdieu, it means only that individual actors no longer entirely consciously and rationally decide (as in rational choice theory for example). Strategization is crucial to Bourdieu’s theory; it is integral to an understanding of the logics of the various fields he analyses. Indeed, Alexander goes so far as to accuse Bourdieu of extending the logic of rational choice theory to the entire social domain. And this goes (apparently!) directly in the teeth of the unconscious element of habitus. Hence, for Alexander, “unconscious strategization” is the oxymoron at the heart of Bourdieu’s conception of practical action.

Bourdieu’s theory asserts that the logic of the fields requires strategic actions to be undertaken by the actors operating within them, yet the concept of habitus apparently does not allow that strategy to be conscious. The problem with this understanding of habitus is that it renders uni-dimensional what is inherently a multi-dimensional concept. Alexander tries to understand habitus in terms of more conventional notions of socialization and norms. He asserts:

Norms, if indeed they are norms, can bind action only on non-rational, subjective, and non-individual grounds. They cannot do so—habitus cannot work—if actors have the ability to weigh the adherence to norms solely according to the external and objective consequences of their acts. (ibid.)

Actors certainly do not weigh their conformity with social norms solely according to external consequences. Norms, the internalization of social conditioning, may bind action purely in a non-rational, subjective and non-individual manner. Habitus does not. It is not a question of whether actors calculate or don’t calculate the probable consequences of their actions. Obviously, they frequently do. What Alexander fails to understand is that Bourdieu has not elaborated a whole new conceptual tool box for nothing: habitus causally affects (determines?)

both the way actors perform calculations and the means they possess for doing so. Further, the rationality inherent in the actions exists on more than one level.

An actor performs certain conscious calculations in a particular “game” (the rules “determined” by the relatively autonomous logic of that field). But the strategy he or she adopts may also have quite unconscious “determinants”. That is, they may be unconscious on one level, yet conscious on another. For example, a manual laborer’s son “decides” not to try hard to answer a difficult arithmetic problem on a school test. Underlying this “decision”, is perhaps a habitualized but nonetheless relatively rationally justifiable stance: that “academic achievement is not for people like me, so why should I bother? It won’t give me any advantage”. But yet he is not consciously thinking about the facts and logic which might support this argument; he is simply doodling and daydreaming during his arithmetic test. However, he both understands, and could, if pressed, articulate a version of the social mobility argument alluded to (he has possibly heard something like it all his life—from his father, friends and even his teachers). The argument itself (as he understands it) is neither wholly individual or non-individual. Rather, he has individualized (applied to himself) an argument which is essentially collective (that is, class based and probabilistic).

Finally, there is a level of unconscious rationality to the action that is definitely not individualistic. That is, the unintended consequences of his action in the systemic reproduction of class inequalities has a logic inherent to it which encompasses his “calculations” and the unconscious pre-dispositions as to how they were made and how they will be performed. Further, there is a logic to the probabilistic outcomes of the collective manifestation of these individual decisions and actions which in turn feed back upon the way the individual actors both strategise and are unconsciously affected. All this taken together forms the reproductive logic of the system. Positing structure versus agency, conscious choice versus unconscious determinations, intended versus unintended consequences, free will versus determinism, as a series of mutually exclusive absolute oppositions seems a very shallow explanatory strategy by comparison. The logical contradictions Alexander finds in Bourdieu’s concepts are only so if posed in these ontologically impoverished terms: a reality without depth or complexity.

CONCLUSION

Essentially what I have argued here, is that Alexander fails to understand what are Bourdieu’s deepest insights. Where transcendence over confusion, contradiction and superficiality have been achieved, he sees incoherence and logical contradiction. *Habitus* is not a synonym for “norm” and “unconscious strategising” (though this is a rather misleading way of expressing it) is by no means an impossibility but a daily fact of life. Bourdieu’s concept of practical action is one

in which rational and non-rational, conscious and unconscious, individual and non-individual, action operates on more than one level . . . simultaneously.

There is operative in reality what may be called (Lopez, 1999) a logic of simultaneity. This is working at the same time as the more familiar temporal logic of sequential causality. Bourdieu's analysis, as said earlier, moves dialectically between synchrony and diachrony to address this reality. The two logics do not conflict in reality; they are at work on different levels. The logic of simultaneity may be considered as akin to the Althusserian concept of over-determination (Althusser 1970). This notion of structural causality in the social realm rids social theory of a pernicious error—the tendency to try and understand action atomistically, as wholly discrete instances in causal sequence. Social actions are not simply billiard balls careening off one another. Each “preceding instance” in such a sequence, while perhaps the immediate cause to a successor action, is itself framed within a set of (inter)relations of (determined and determining) position.

Though Alexander, as said earlier, tends to read Bourdieu, in spite of his protests, as just this sort of Marxist; the label fails to do him justice. That is, discrete and individual actions, billiard ball causality, really does operate in the social world as well. Althusser's structuralist version of Marxism has been justifiably criticised for a too extreme over-socialised and anti-humanist account of social life and historical causality. Bourdieu's account on the other hand, includes both: the “logic of simultaneity” and the “logic of temporal sequential causality”. “Dialectics” has long been a magical term for Marxists, a vague notion frequently used to paper over the cracks in theories which merely display ordinary, common garden variety, logical contradictions. However, Bourdieu really does achieve the advantages such thinking has always potentially possessed. He moves dialectically back and forward between localised sequential causality and the wider processes of structural causality. He can analyse discrete actions in terms of both unconscious determinants and conscious strategies. To do so, however, necessitates looking at the outcomes of previous decisions by agents and the “determinants” of them. Bourdieu can also analyse structural causality and social system reproduction wherein logics of simultaneity are found. Changes on this level manifest themselves in terms of probabilistic outcomes and tendencies. However, to properly understand any of these different aspects of social action and structure (the simultaneously structured and structuring dimensions of both) requires dialectical movement between different levels of analysis. Such a procedure methodologically corresponds to the complexity inherent in a stratified reality.

A fundamental feature of a realist philosophy of science is its emphasis upon ontology. Positivist and other post-positivist philosophies of science all seem ontologically impoverished by comparison. The very possibility of social life existing at all is predicated upon certain of its apparent features also being real. But while epistemological and ontological claims must be conceptually distinct,

they also must “fit” harmoniously with one another. Epistemological positions imply (whether stated or not) various ontological descriptions of reality. There has been enormous confusion with respect to this and sorting out such confusion is the principle accomplishment of the (relatively) new realist philosophies of science⁴. Bourdieu’s range of theorizing is not, of course, on this level of generality. He does not offer us a theory of knowledge or dialectics or philosophy of science. Rather, he seems to exemplify the intelligent and creative application of one such meta-theoretical perspective, as Alexander, again correctly, has asserted. He does do by offering an ontologically stratified account of social life. Further, he seems quite clear on his distinctions between ontological and epistemological claims.

I have referred frequently to the “levels” of reality addressed by Bourdieu. This perhaps might seem to imply that Alexander does not have any notion of different levels of analysis. Actually he is quite sophisticated when speaking of different levels of analysis. But this remains epistemological. There are different levels of abstraction and different levels of generality for him. But what of reality? It is as if homo-philosophicus, man as knower, possesses all possible complexity while homo-activus, man as doer, lives only on the surface. Action is action; reduction is reduction.

But to come to an understanding of the perplexing problematics of agency, social action and social structure, requires analyses which possess not only epistemological sophistication but ontological depth. Social structure cannot be understood merely by a generalized analysis of the conditions of discrete actions which attempts to render them understandable through abstraction. Social structure really exists. And yes, actions do occur on some level as discrete instances, as well. But this is not the only aspect of their reality. The self-reflexive and rational decision making capacities of individual human beings are also real, but they are exercised simultaneously, with the non-individualistic and non-rational causal forces at work upon them. Nor are the workings of these latter forces utterly divorced from the rational reflections of the individual agents either. Rather they are so fundamentally inscribed upon the individual agents, that they can be literally said to be embodied within them. But though this is so, the structural forces still possess a logic of their own. The cultural spheres of human life certainly don’t simply “reflect” the “economic base”. The material interests at work in the cultural sphere do not manifest themselves simply and obviously as economic interests. But Bourdieu has shown, I believe, that they really are at work nonetheless; and to quite some extent he has shown us how they work. This is an enormous achievement and one which goes against the grain of much contemporary theorizing.

Let me conclude with Bourdieu’s own words which perhaps explains the worries many (Alexander is not alone) have with his sort of explanation: “Because all progress in the knowledge in the laws of the social world increases the degree of perceived necessity, it is natural that social science is increasingly accused of

‘determinism’ the further it advances” (1993 p. 25). Bourdieu is wont to refer quite often to “laws”. This is perhaps one of the main points on which Alexander and others are misled. They fail to understand that Bourdieu refers to scientific “laws” in the manner in which they are understood by realists, that is, as tendencies (e.g. Bourdieu, 1993, p. 25) existent in reality but about which our knowledge is fallible (ibid.). I don’t believe that Bourdieu has written the last word upon the complex realities of individual choices, unintended consequences, structural determinations etc., in *any* of the various fields he has analyzed for us. Rather I would say that he has merely written the “last words” so far. But we would be wise to be guided by them in our further investigations.

Garry Potter

25 High Street
Wivenhoe, Essex
CO7 9BE
UK
email: potter@essex.ac.uk

*As of August 10th 2000: Department of Sociology
Wilfred Laurier University
Ontario
CANADA
email: gpotter@wlu.ca*

NOTES

¹ There would be, of course, many other sorts of reasons for flying (or not) particular “flags”. Alex Callinicos in an otherwise excellent article “Bordieu or Giddens?” NLR, makes the (to me anyway) curious suggestion that Bourdieu is depriving himself of valuable intellectual capital by refusing to utilise Marxist intellectual resources. His argument is that Bourdieu’s intellectual trajectory is such that it is leading him inexorably to engage with the classic questions of Marxist political economy. That may well be so. However, I believe that given a certain intellectual division of labour Bourdieu could quite sensibly simply assert as he once did when asked about his failure to offer an analysis of the economy “that’s not my job” (1993 p.). More importantly, Callinicos while praising Bourdieu’s political activism in support of the oppressed and his utilisations of his position as a “public intellectual” in that service, seems to fail to recognise the degree to which the Marxist label deprives people of intellectual capital today. Bourdieu has been increasingly demonised in recent years both for his political engagements and the political implications of his scientific work. However, to be demonised as a “public intellectual” is not at all the same as to be dismissed without even consideration. In Bourdieu’s own terms one could speculate that his habitus and the French political field has influenced his adoption of a particular (and particularly effective) strategy to maximise his intellectual capital’s utility in the political field. It is precisely what enables him to be a “public intellectual” in a manner not accessible to Marxists such as Callinicos himself. That is, there is much more political capital readily transferable from the intellectual field in France; Marxism’s intellectual fashionability is such that it functions as debt rather than credit, and Bourdieu and Callinicos come from different backgrounds, hence possess different habituses. We can only speculate whether or not Bourdieu’s strategising in this context is conscious or unconscious. But, as is said in the main text in slightly different terms, perhaps the contemporary intellectual field is now so constructed that the conditions for reception of ideas are such that “Marxisante” insights can no longer be articulated in Marxist language.

² Alexander suggests that the concept of “field” seemingly “de-Marxifies” Bourdieu’s model of society. This has been suggested by other commentators (e.g. Brubaker 1985). He also suggests that it only seemingly gives a Weberian edge to his analysis. He argues, and I agree, that this is illusory. The Weberian notion of “closure” is absent in his analysis (Alexander 1995 pp. 157–159). By this it is not meant that social exclusion is not part of the functioning of fields; but rather the manner in which such is related to class and interests, produces a different emphasis as to the degree of autonomy implied. This, for Alexander, appears to mean no autonomy at all; whereas for me (and for Bourdieu himself presumably) whether we want to call it Marxist or not, it is a brilliant solution to a tricky problem. It clearly specifies both the degree and nature of relative autonomy. It shows how material interests are embedded in intellectual and cultural life. But it does not imply that the products of either are only expressions of such interests.

This article, for example, can be analyzed and understood in two completely different ways. That is, first, it can be criticized in terms of its content and style. Its argument, its scholarship, empirical assertions etc. can be evaluated and critiqued. Its mode of expression may be judged. Second, it can be considered sociologically. It can be considered as a move in a game, a game in which there are points to be scored, with (relative) winners and losers. The fact that there are not cash prizes in this game does not mean that material interests are absent. Nor does the fact of such interests being present speak to the question of the logic of my argument . . . though their presence may well have some influence as to its general success in persuasiveness. That the article was written was, of course, a matter of choice, a conscious decision to engage in a particular sort of action. But the “field” itself certainly cannot entirely be explained in terms of the sum of all such individual choices and actions.

³ Unfortunately, for the sake of scholarly accuracy, I must somewhat undermine my own argument here. My argument is that Bourdieu’s work exposes the complex relationship between different levels of reality. The expression of such, may, in purely semantic terms, appear as a simple logical contradiction (i.e. an oxymoron). However, the contradiction is in fact located in reality itself—to wit, in the relationship between different levels of reality—and the expression of such is thus a dialectical contradiction rather than any simple logical one. This logic is dependent upon a notion of a stratified ontology which is fundamental to a critical realist position (see Bhaskar, 1998 for example). Realists should thus be far less inclined to Alexander’s form of error concerning this aspect of Bourdieu’s work. However, unfortunately, in a recent article, Andrew Sayer (1999), otherwise a good realist, makes exactly this error. He explicitly accepts Alexander’s argument that “unconscious strategization” is an oxymoron. The fact of Sayer’s realism in general, thus, to some degree undermines my argument. I can only say that, hopefully, as a result of his realism, he would find the force of the argument contained within the remainder of this article all the more compelling.

⁴ The argument I have been propounding here as realist concerning structural causality is consonant with the majority view amongst realists that social structures possess causal power. However, scientific realism is actually quite a broad church. Rom Harré, one of its earliest and most influential exponents, does not accept this view. Social structure, he would argue, is real but nonetheless does not possess causal powers. Roy Bhaskar, on the other hand, propounds a view on this subject, which I believe is consonant both with that presented in this article and that maintained by most realists. See for example Archer, (1995), Benton, (1977), Collier (1994) Manicas, (1987), Potter (1999). See the debate between Bhaskar and Harré on this question in *After Postmodernism: An Introduction to Critical Realism*, Athlone Press, Potter, G. and Lopez, J. (eds.), forthcoming. It is my belief that the relation between Bhaskar’s ontological descriptions and Bourdieu’s substantive analyses is such that they are mutually supportive. Certainly it is the position maintained in this

article that this sort of realist position upon social structure and causality is both implied Bourdieu's concepts and a (relatively) accurate explanation of how such causal mechanisms actually work.

REFERENCES

- ALEXANDER, J.C. (1982) *Theoretical Logic in Sociology Vol. I: Positivism, Presuppositions and Current Controversies* University of California Press.
- ALEXANDER, J.C. (1990) "Understanding the Relative Autonomy of Culture," pp. 1–27 in Alexander and S. Seidman eds., *Culture and Society: Contemporary Debates* New York Cambridge University Press.
- ALEXANDER, J.C. (1995a) *Fin de Siecle Social Theory: Relativism, Reduction, and the Problem of Reason* London and New York Verso.
- ALEXANDER, J.C. (1995b) *La Reduction: Critique de Bourdieu* Paris CERF.
- ALEXANDER, J.C. (1995c) "Reduction and Deceit in Social Theory", in Alexander, *Neofunctionalism and After* New York and Oxford Blackwell.
- ALTHUSSER, L. (1970) *Lenin and Philosophy and other Essays* New York Monthly Review Press
- ARCHER, M. et al., (1998) *Critical Realism: Essential Readings*, Routledge.
- ARCHER, M. (1995) *Realist Social Theory: The Morphogenetic Approach*, Cambridge University Press.
- BENTON, T. (1977) *Philosophical Foundations of the Three Sociologies*, Routledge & Kegan Paul
- BHASKAR, R. (1998) *The Possibility of Naturalism*, Routledge.
- BOURDIEU, P. (1975) "The Specificity of the Scientific Field and the Social Conditions for the Progress of Reason", *Social Science Information* **14**(6) 19–47.
- BOURDIEU, P. (1977a) *Outline of a Theory of Practice* Cambridge Cambridge University Press.
- BOURDIEU, P., and J.C. PASSERON (1977b) *Reproduction: In Education, Society and Culture* London Sage.
- BOURDIEU, P. (1984) *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* Harvard University Press.
- BOURDIEU, P. (1988a) *Homo Academicus* Cambridge Polity Press.
- BOURDIEU, P. (1988b) "On Interest and the Relative Autonomy of Symbolic Power", *Working Papers and Proceedings of the Center for Psychosocial Studies* No.20 Chicago Center for Psychosocial Studies.
- BOURDIEU, P. (1990) *The Logic of Practice* Cambridge Polity Press.
- BOURDIEU, P. (1993) *Sociology in Question* London Sage.
- BRUBAKER, R. (1985) "Rethinking Classical Theory: The Sociological Vision of Pierre Bourdieu" *Theory and Society* (14), 745–775.
- CALLINICOS, A. (1999) "Anthony Giddens or Pierre Pourdieu?" *NLR* 236, 77–102.
- COLLIER, A. (1994) *Critical Realism: An Introduction to Roy Bhaskar's Philosophy*, Verso.
- HARRÉ, R. (1970) *Causal Powers*, Blackwell.
- JENKINS, R. (1982) "Pierre Bourdieu and the Reproduction of Determinism", *Sociology* **16**(2), 271–281.
- LOPEZ, J. (1999) *Discursive Exigencies in Enunciating the Concept of Structure*, PhD Thesis, University of Essex.
- LOPEZ, J. and POTTER, G. (eds.), *After Postmodernism: An Introduction to Critical Realism*, Athlone Press forthcoming.
- MANICAS, P. (1987) *A History and Philosophy of Social Sciences*, Blackwell.
- POTTER, G. (1999) *The Bet: Truth in Science, Literature and Everyday Knowledges*, Ashgate.
- SAYER, A. (1999) "Bourdieu, Smith and disinterested judgement", *The Sociological Review*, August.