Habitus and the Practical Logic of Practice: An Interpretation

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ABSTRACT
Bourdieu confuses himself and others by calling his project a ‘transcendence’ of the objectivist–subjectivist antinomy. Contrary to claims, Bourdieu’s methodology and theoretical premises are directly opposed to phenomenological social constructivism, though he makes use of several key phenomenological concepts. Habitus enriches the objectivist perspective by specifying a partial theory of agency which, contrary to critics, is non-reductionist. Habitus’ current formulation and usage brim with inconsistencies and ambiguities. It is non-reflective but not corporeal; it should not be equated to cultural capital; it is specifiable into concrete components instead of being ‘difficult to specify empirically’. The concepts of practical logic and doxa are connatural to habitus, but the concept of strategy derives from a different premise and is non-essential to habitus. The above interpretation derives from the critical realist view. An empirical study of China’s trade unionists is provided for illustration.

KEY WORDS
agency / Bourdieu / critical realism / habitus / objectivist–subjectivist antinomy / reductionism

There is considerable confusion in Bourdieu’s formulation of habitus and its understanding by others. This article provides a two-level interpretation. First, regarding habitus’ theoretical status and value, Bourdieu speaks of ‘transcending’ the ‘false’ objectivist–subjectivist antinomy. Supporters claim a successful marriage of phenomenological social constructivism (PSC) and structuralism. Critics fault Bourdieu for remaining objectivistic, usually coupled with the charge of determinism-reductionism. I argue that Bourdieu does not
marry PSC to structuralism because both his methodological (for or against causal and genetic analysis) and theoretical (concerning the concepts of construction, reality and objectivity) positions are in direct opposition to PSC. He does utilize several key phenomenological concepts, not in order to transcend, but to enrich the objectivist perspective by specifying the mechanisms that link structural conditioning to social practices and regularities. Despite his misleading remarks, Bourdieu states this himself. By calling this ‘transcendence’, he has simply confused himself and others. But while critics are correct to say that Bourdieu remains objectivistic, objectivism is not necessarily deterministic-reductionist. On the basis of the critical realist concepts of emergence and vertical explanation, I outline a case for habitus as a non-reductionist concept, vertically explained by its structural conditions, but possessing irreducible emergent mechanisms of its own. Moreover, while habitus is a partial theory of agency only, it constitutes an indispensable element of any overall non-reductionist objectivist theory of agency.

Second, I show how in its current formulation-usage, habitus is stricken with inconsistencies and ambiguities. To overcome them, I argue with reference to Merleau-Ponty and Husserl that habitus should be conceptualized, not as corporeal automatism, but as practical sense emergent, in the critical realist sense, from experience. This interpretation is congruent with the argument that habitus is non-reductionist. As a result, I reject equating habitus to cultural capital (which also serves to safeguard habitus’ specific explanatory value), and dispense with Bourdieu’s myriad descriptions of the concept by specifying three inter-linked components for it: belief-premises, perception-appreciation, and a descriptive and prescriptive practical sense of objective possibilities and of the forthcoming. Physical comportments and the like are conceptualized as objectifications of habitus, instead of being its component elements. Moreover, this specification enables more precise operationalization of the concept than is currently possible.

To demonstrate the value of the above theoretical interpretation, an empirical study of the habitus and practices of China’s trade unionists is provided.

**Habitus and the Practical Logic of Practice**

Bourdieu wishes to ‘transcend’ the ‘false’ objectivist–subjectivist antinomy. Habitus is formulated for this purpose (1985). Is this antinomy ‘false’? Has Bourdieu ‘transcended’ it? If the answer to both questions is ‘no’, what then is habitus’ theoretical value?

Bourdieu supporters claim a successful marriage of phenomenological social constructivism (PSC) and structuralism in his ‘transcendence’. Sulkenen (1982) credits him for devising a valuable ‘working compromise’ between structure-function and subject-meaning. Wacquant (1992: 11) praises Bourdieu’s *social praxeology* [which] weaves together a “structuralist” and a “constructivist” approach’, echoing Bourdieu’s self-labelling of his theory as ‘structuralist
constructivism’ and ‘constructivist structuralism’. Swartz (1997: 95–8) compares Bourdieu to ‘social constructionist theorists such as Berger and Luckmann’, while remarking that he ‘stress[es] the importance of agency within a structuralist framework’.

Bourdieu does make use of several key phenomenological concepts, but his self-labelling notwithstanding, his project is actually directly opposed to PSC both methodologically and theoretically. For simplicity, consider the PSC founders Swartz mentioned. Methodologically, PSC is ‘a purely descriptive method’, which ‘refrains from any causal or genetic hypotheses’ (Berger and Luckmann, 1967: 20). In direct contrast, Bourdieu deals with causal and genetic analysis, and he critiques PSC, inter alia, precisely for excluding the ‘economic and social conditions’ of the natural attitude (1977: 233). Theoretically, Berger and Luckmann (1967: 104, 33, 58) state: ‘As man externalizes himself, he constructs the world into which he externalizes himself. In the process of externalization, he projects his own meanings into reality.’ ‘Social structure is the sum total of … [Schutzian] typifications and of the recurrent patterns of interaction established by means of them.’ ‘The habitualizations and typifications … [are] conceptions of … individuals.’ In this process, individuals (or groups of individuals) advance ‘competing definitions’ of ‘commonsense knowledge’. Whatever passes for ‘commonsense knowledge’ out of this competition constitutes the ‘world’ or ‘reality’. This ‘reality’ is spoken of as ‘objective’ but it is obvious that it exists entirely on what Bhaskar (1997, 1998) calls the transitive dimension. There is no concept of social structure as consisting of intransitive relations. Until now, external, i.e. intransitive, world ‘bracketing’ remains a central, if troublesome, tenet of many constructivists. In direct contrast, for Bourdieu, reality consists of intransitive relations instead of transitive ‘commonsense knowledge’, and construction does not originate from self-deriving subjective meanings since agents construct ‘with points of view, interests, and principles of vision determined by the position they occupy in the world’ (1996: 2). In sum, there is scant justification, despite claims by supporters and Bourdieu himself, to say that he has married PSC to structuralism.

What about Bourdieu’s relation to structuralism? In an interview entitled ‘From Rules to Strategies’ (1990c: 63–5), he explains his differences with Levi-Strauss in an exceptionally clear manner. He specifies three different senses for the word ‘rule’: as more or less explicit codes (e.g. law, marriage rules); as objective regularity; and as ‘the model or principle constructed by the scientist’. Levi-Strauss mistakes the third sense for the real principle of practice. However, social regularities do exist, as ‘the aggregate product of individual actions guided by the same constraints, whether objective (the necessities written into the structure of the game or partly objectified in the rules [in the first sense]), or incorporated …’ ‘Nothing is simultaneously freer and more constrained than the action of the good player.’ ‘[H]ow can behaviour be regulated without being the product of obedience to rules [in the first sense]?’ Thus, Bourdieu speaks unequivocally of regularities produced by constraints, which are of two types, the incorporated (i.e. habitus) and the objective, the latter of which is partly
structural (‘necessities written into the structure’) and partly in the form of rule in the first sense. Because the ‘freedom of invention and improvisation which enables the infinity of moves allowed by the game to be produced (…) has the same limits as the game’, even if rules in the first sense are (following Wittgenstein) enabling, they are enabling within the game’s limits. Whether or not habitus is enabling or non-enabling (i.e. purely constraining), an issue to be commented on in due course, the same, of course, applies to its ‘freedom of invention and improvisation’, while structural constraints are clearly non-enabling. Hence, Bourdieu’s framework retains the notion of objectively demarcated limits.

How then does Bourdieu differ from Levi-Strauss? One major defect of most objectivist models is that they proceed directly from structural conditions to social regularities, without specifying the mechanisms whereby agents are constituted to engage in practices that display the regularities. This failure leaves them open to the charge of reductionism (which may or may not be justified). The aim of Bourdieu’s project is to specify those mechanisms which link structure and practices-regularities. Thus, he states that marriage is not ‘simply … a set of ritual acts signifying by their difference in a system of differences [alluding to Levi-Strauss] (which it also is) but … [also] a social strategy …’ (1990a: 16, emphasis added). In other words, structural conditioning exists and is prioritized, but social scientific explanation must go beyond it to specifying the above mechanisms. This is not any ‘transcendence’, but an enrichment, of the objectivist perspective. By calling this ‘transcendence’, Bourdieu has simply confused himself and others.

Hence, critics (Jenkins, 1982, 1992: 175; Mouzelis, 1995: 111, 2000) are right to categorize Bourdieu as an objectivist. However, this is often coupled with the charge of determinism-reductionism. Jenkins is representative in faulting Bourdieu for both determinism and remaining ‘firmly rooted in objectivism’. It is as though objectivism is necessarily deterministic-reductionist, as shown in Mouzelis’ claim that the only way to escape from determinism is ‘to take much more seriously … the voluntaristic [of a methodological individualist kind] … dimension of social games’.

How valid is the charge of determinism-reductionism (hereinafter reductionism)? Jenkins (1982: 272) regards Bourdieu’s theory as reductionist because it is ‘no more than another form of determination in the last instance’. This characterization of the concept of last-instance determination is common enough. What Jenkins has in mind is probably explanatory (instead of ontological) reduction, i.e. the complete explanatory subsumption in the last instance of habitus by its formative structural conditions. However, the critical realist Collier (1989, 1994) proposes the non-reductionist concept of vertical explanation (understood as emergence and dependence)7 and interprets economic determination in the last instance as an example. Let’s consider this further.

Collier argues that the ideological and political instances emerge horizontally8 from the economic, but remain vertically explained by it. That is to say,
they are what they are because the economic is what it is, and not vice versa. However, as emergent strata, they possess causal mechanisms irreducible to the economic. For instance, ‘rule by man’ (versus rule of law) in China is premised upon China’s production relations, but the exact forms it has taken in history possess their own logic irreducible to the economic (Lau, 2001a). Similarly, habitus emerges horizontally from its structural conditions; it is what it is because these conditions are what they are, and not vice versa. However, as suggested later, it possesses emergent causal mechanisms irreducible to these conditions. Vertical explanation does not entail that in event causation, the causal mechanisms of the more basic strata always predominate over those of the emergent strata. Events are co-determined by mechanisms of different strata, but in no a priori fixed proportions. Nevertheless, even if in a particular event, the mechanism of an emergent stratum predominates, it remains vertically explained by the mechanism of the more basic stratum.

How habitus ‘works out’ varies between individuals. As is well known, this variation remains under-theorized by Bourdieu. This is one area where habitus’ irreducible emergent mechanisms are likely to be found. Given habitus’ dispositional nature, psychological mechanisms are probably involved. In saying so, let it be emphasized that the psychological has to be understood as a stratum that emerges vertically from the neurophysiological and horizontally from the social synchronically. The importance of this is that psychological theories derive from explicit or implicit philosophical premises. In theorizing how habitus’ ‘working out’ varies, theories based upon incompatible philosophical premises (e.g. methodological individualism) are to be ruled out. With reference to event causation, it is possible that the variation caused by habitus’ emergent mechanisms may in individual cases overwhelm the effects of the structural conditions that vertically explain habitus itself. This is why habitus only predicts general regularity, not certainty in individual cases.

In fact, from the critical realist view, the explanation of individual variation on the level of event causation need not be limited to habitus’ emergent mechanisms alone. The distinction between internal/necessary relations such as that between two atoms of hydrogen and one of oxygen in water, and external/contingent relations such as that between water and air temperature (Sayer, 1992) is clearly relevant. Habitus and its structural conditions are internally related, whereas at least some of an individual’s life occurrences and her social milieu are contingently related. The effects of such contingent relations evidently enter into the equation of how habitus ‘works out’.

In any case, while a strong argument can be made for habitus as a non-reductionist concept, its theorization remains incomplete. Moreover, as is well known, habitus is most successful in explaining social reproduction, but ill suited to conceptualize endogenously generated social change. In my view, a satisfactory objectivist but non-reductionist theory of social agency, which explains both change and reproduction, remains to be founded. As far as I can see, habitus constitutes an indispensable element for the founding of such a theory.
Turning to the concept itself, after all these years, it remains stricken with inconsistencies and ambiguities, so much so that ‘[e]ven among those knowledgeable about Bourdieu’s work, considerable disagreement exists on just what Bourdieu’s concept represents’ (Swartz, 1997: 96).

First, in Bourdieu’s usage, habitus initially refers to a collective practical sense of objective possibilities (1990b). However, Bourdieu subsequently theorized about the bourgeois habitus of visiting art galleries (1984), the scientific habitus (1975, 1992), the habitus of a philologist (1993), etc. This is why Lash (1993) equates habitus to cultural capital. This loose usage has led observers to critique it as a ‘theoretical deus ex machina’ (DiMaggio, 1979) or ‘conceptual monster’ (Joppke, 1986). Bourdieu also refers to habitus by myriad descriptions: ‘schemes of perception, appreciation, and action’, ‘system of dispositions’, ‘cognitive and motivating structures’, ‘practical belief’, etc., etc. As shown later on, this is due to his inconsistent conceptualization of the concept.

A most serious ambiguity concerns Bourdieu’s increasing emphasis on habitus’ corporeality, to the exclusion of his early recognition of the cognitive dimension. Habitus is ‘society written into the body’, ‘a state of the body’ comparable to ‘motor schemes and body automatisms’ (1990a: 68–9, 104, 1990c: 63). Bourdieu’s inspiration comes from Merleau-Ponty (1962, 1963), who rejects the purely contemplative Cartesian cogito as the provenance of the subject, and posits a ‘pre-objective’ (meaning anterior to the subject-object distinction) realm of experience in which person and world exist in a corporeal ‘complicity’ prior to the emergence of self-consciousness. This pre-objective embodied being-in-the-world does not only apply to the infant, but continues throughout life. It underpins the acquisition of habits such as moving an arm, typing and driving through ‘the motor grasping of a motor significance’, though in a non-behaviourist way. It is the notion of embodied habits that Bourdieu applies to habitus, though he insists that habitus’ dispositions are not habits because of their ‘generative (if not creative) capacit[ies]’ or transposability which may engender ‘very different practices and stances’ or even ‘diametrically opposed conducts’ in different social situations (1990c: 116; Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 122, 135).

Bourdieu sometimes describes habitus’ acquisition with embodied motor skills in mind. Thus, in a lecture to post-graduate students, he talked about transmitting his method in the manner of a ‘sports coach’ through practice, counting ‘principally upon the embodied schemata of [the scientific] habitus’ (1992: 223–4). However, he then proceeded to speak at length on philosophical issues. This brings us to his second, opposed way of describing habitus’ acquisition, in which he speaks of ‘boys [being] taught’, ‘inculcation’ and ‘pedagogic action’ (1984: 471, 1990a: 75, 107). This mode of acquisition would appear to be non-corporeal and implies that at least part of habitus itself cannot be regarded as corporeal, as some of his descriptions of the concept (perception, cognitive structure, etc.) also show.11

Bourdieu correctly perceives that much of social practices are non-reflective. But, despite frequently positing the cognitive dimension, he seems to
think that this can only be grounded upon the notion of corporeal automatism. Many observers are perplexed. Margolis (1999) wonders how ‘body automatisms’ work, and queries whether or not Bourdieu advocates physicalism in which cognitive-cultural elements are simply supervenient on the body. Jenkins (1992: 92–3) asks: ‘what does embodiment mean … Mind, if you like, becomes … an effect, of the body’.

In defending habitus as corporeal, Crossley (2001: 107) argues:

We learn … not by thinking about things but by doing them. Learning is incorporation, an absorption … into the corporeal schema …. This is obvious in the case of [motor skills] … such as how to dance …. Much the same is true of even the most ‘intellectual’ activities … [though] there is a distinction between theoretical learning and practical learning … even the most ‘cerebral’ of social practices often have a strong practical element … theoretical learning is a second-order phenomenon, which presupposes practical skills (…) that make it possible.

Can non-reflective social practices be conceptualized only in terms of embodied automatism? Three key concepts are involved: ‘corporeal’, ‘practical’ and ‘cognitive’. It is important to specify their precise meanings. The corporeal refers to the pre-objective being-in-the-world. In explicating Merleau-Ponty, Archer (2000) employs the concept to refer to embodied knowledge developed through self-discovery in the body’s contact with nature (e.g. swimming) and practical knowledge developed through apprenticeship in the body’s contact with artifacts (e.g. typing and [to use Merleau-Ponty’s famous example] playing soccer). In short, the corporeal pertains to motor skills.

Turning to the practical, is it equivalent to the corporeal? On this issue, it is worth taking a look at the infant’s acquisition of selfhood. In Merleau-Ponty’s view, the infant is condemned to engage in bodily actions upon itself and the world. This experience, however, is asymmetrical. For instance, the infant’s sensations of touching itself and touching an object are different. It is through this that self-consciousness, positing the subject-object distinction, emerges. Hence, selfhood arises not through a Cartesian cogito, but emerges from the bodily being-in-the-world. This naturalistic view of the origins of selfhood is consistent with critical realism, hence its emergence is most appropriately understood in the critical realist sense. Archer (2000: 121–37) speaks of selfhood as being ‘conceptually formed’, as ‘practical consciousness’ or ‘practical concept’. It is not in the form of a reflective ‘I think that’, but of a practical ‘I know how’ the self is distinct from the object world. The practical is, therefore, conceptual or cognitive but non-reflective. In this case, it is corporeally-based in the sense of emergence from the corporeal being-in-the-world, but it is not corporeal itself, for in it the pre-objective has given way to the practical subject–object distinction. This distinction between the practical and the corporeal is of utmost importance. The practical is a non-reflective cognitive sense emerging from experience. Some experience is corporeal, but much social experience is not. In both cases, the practical is non-corporeal.12
The cognitive in the reflective sense is further mediated from the corporeal or experience in general, unless one endorses naïve empiricism (Sayer, 1992: 274), now long-discredited. It is true that reflective cognition is never purely contemplative. As Sayer points out, science involves doing things to nature (e.g. conducting experiments). It is also true that the manipulation of equipment required in many sciences involves motor skill. But the equipment itself is not based upon that skill. Scientific apparatuses such as the microscope are constructed on the basis of theory, i.e. reflective cognition. It is now clear that in the earlier extract, Crossley (2001) commits a double conflation. First, he conflates the corporeal, the practical and the reflectively cognitive by lumping the last (hence, by implication, also the second) into corporeal absorption. Second, in relation to the ‘practical skills’ ‘presupposed’ by ‘theoretical learning’, he conflates these skills with the theoretical basis of scientific equipment.

Habitus is most appropriately understood in terms of the category of the practical. It is not bodily motor skill, but non-reflective cognitive sense. It can be seen that understanding the latter as emergent from experience is consistent with the argument that habitus is objectivist but non-reductionist. The experience concerned is none other than the experience of habitus’ structural conditions. In arriving at the category of the practical, it is significant that we are brought back to Husserl from whom Bourdieu actually borrows the habitus concept. Husserl (1973, 1989) speaks of past experiences or ‘retentions’ incorporated into a structure of ‘intuitive expectations’ or ‘practical anticipations’ as ‘protensions’, or a ‘practical sense’ of what is ‘forthcoming’ as an ‘objective potentiality’. This intuitive sense of anticipation of the forthcoming already inscribed in the present, based upon a practical relation to the world, is contrasted to reflection which is capable of positing an open-ended future. Husserl revives the medieval scholastic term habitus for this intuitive sense. He describes the practical experiential relation to the world on which habitus is based as the ‘natural attitude’ or ‘doxic experience’. In other words, because people experience the world non-reflectively (the doxic relation), they dispositionally (habitus’ sense) protend the present to the forthcoming. In also adopting the concept of doxa, Bourdieu simply replaces Husserl’s world in general with the social world: ‘[doxa is people’s] primary experience of the social world ... [characterized by] an adherence to [the existing] relations of order which ... are accepted as self-evident’ (1984: 471) and hence protended to the future.

As intuitive sense, habitus works as automatically as bodily motor skills. The transposability of habitus, emphasized by Bourdieu, will also be much better grounded through conceptualizing habitus as practical sense instead of corporeal motor mechanism, most forms of which imply invariant habits. As a matter of fact, sense is a broader category that can incorporate the corporeal, but not vice versa. Motor habits are based upon pre-objective bodily sense, which is different from practical sense.

It should be noted that habitus’ non-reflectiveness does not entail that it absolutely cannot surface to awareness. Even bodily motor skills, as Archer (2000: 166) points out, do not always necessarily remain below consciousness.
Thus, we do find motor skills being explicitly taught, though the teaching can never replace self-discovery or apprenticeship. Similarly, practical sense can surface to awareness, as presently shown.

Habitus comprises two sides. One side (as ‘structured structure’) concerns formation. Acquisition may sometimes involve reflection, but mostly involves non-reflective sense, which may become conscious. For instance, in dining out with their children, a lower-class couple avoids certain restaurants. The children practically sense that they are ‘not for us’. Nevertheless, they may one day ask to go to one of these restaurants and be told that ‘it’s too expensive’. Throughout, nothing can be regarded as corporeal. The other side (as ‘structuring structure’) concerns practices generated by dispositions, which are mostly non-reflective, but can also surface to awareness. Thus, agents are sometimes able to account for their practices, for instance, when induced to reflect upon them. In fact, Bourdieu (1990a: 16, 176) himself often speaks in terms of ‘more or less conscious’ and ‘consciously or unconsciously’.

Turning to the ‘stuff’ of habitus, Swartz (1997: 290) reckons that it is ‘difficult to specify empirically’, while Jenkins (1992: 93) complains that ‘we still do not know what the habitus is’. Such doubts arise only as a result of treating the concept loosely. To begin with, I reject equating the concept to cultural capital. This is not only because doing so strips it of much of its specific explanatory value and renders it largely inapplicable to the culturally-deprived. More importantly, much of cultural capital is reflectively cognitive, contrary to habitus’ practical nature. Next, I propose to conceptualize habitus’ components into three categories: (1) fundamental beliefs, unthought premises or taken-for-granted assumptions (hereinafter belief-premises); (2) perception and appreciation or understanding (hereinafter perception-appreciation); and (3) a descriptive and prescriptive practical sense of objective possibilities (‘that’s not for the likes of us’ and ‘that’s the only thing to do’ respectively) and of the forthcoming (in Husserl’s sense). Obviously, these components are closely interlinked. For instance, belief-premises can influence perception-appreciation; the latter can affect the sense of possibilities, etc. As can be seen, these categories are in keeping with interpreting habitus as practical sense. It is also evident that concrete specification such as the above enables more precise operationalization of the concept than is currently possible. From this angle, the above categories constitute provisional proposals subject to further refinement.

This leaves out one of Bourdieu’s favourite descriptions of habitus, namely, as ‘schemes of action’. I understand these to refer to things like physical deportments such as the submissive posture of a social inferior in the presence of a social superior, and ritual acts and motions. Given habitus’ nature as practical sense, instead of conceiving physical deportments and the like as its elements, they are more appropriately conceived of as its objectifications. Theoretical consistency aside, one should note that Bourdieu himself refers to such things as features of the Kabyle house to illustrate the Kabyle habitus. It clearly makes little sense to speak of these inanimate features as dispositional elements. In fact, Bourdieu (1990a: 108) sometimes recognizes this and also speaks in terms
of ‘objectifications of the schemes ... in words, things or practices [e.g. rites]’. Further, this interpretation of physical deportments and the like is not undermined by viewing their acquisition as, at least in some cases, ‘a practical mimesis (or mimeticism) which ... takes place below the level of consciousness’ (1990a: 73). This is because mimicking is actually non-corporeal. One may engage in mimicking in trying to acquire a motor skill, but whether or not mimicking does help, acquisition is ultimately achieved through self-discovery or apprenticeship with one’s own body. Thus, even in the case of mimesis of ‘schemes of action’, the acquisition is based upon practically sensing the mimicked behaviour, not through corporeal transmission in some mysterious way.

Bourdieu argues that practices generated by habitus follow a ‘practical logic’, contrasting it to the Levi-Straussian model’s ‘logical logic’ which reduces action directly to structure. Given habitus’ nature as practical sense, the logic of practice is naturally practical. Habitus and practical logic focus on agency’s ‘process’ aspect. These concepts derive from phenomenological premises. In contrast, Bourdieu conceptualizes the ends of action on a non-phenomenological basis by seeing action as interest-pursuing. Interest is defined vaguely as whatever motivates or drives action toward consequences that matter, but in practice it is always oriented towards the accumulation of power and capital (Swartz, 1997: 71, 78). Given the nature of habitus and practical logic, Bourdieu needs to render the pursuit of interests as a non-reflective process. He does this by adopting Merleau-Ponty’s soccer game analogy. Hence, practices are conceived of as clustered around social ‘games’ played in different social ‘fields’, in which agents act with a ‘feel for the game’, a ‘sense of placement’, etc. in pursuing interests. Merleau-Ponty’s sense here is what I have specified as pre-objective bodily sense in the above. It can be seen that interest is field- and game-specific (which is why Bourdieu subsequently favours replacing interest with the game-related term illusio). For instance, symbolic capital is the illusio in the game played in the intellectual field. Bourdieu terms interest-pursuing actions as ‘strategy’ without the conscious connotation of that term. Hence, strategy is non-reflective action generated by habitus in pursuit of illusio in specific fields-games.

Given the different premises of the concepts of habitus-practical logic and strategy, there exists a disjuncture between them. Thus, it is perfectly conceivable that habitus-practical logic can be applied to non-illusio-pursuing practices. For instance, Weber’s notion of traditional action was a rudimentary ‘process’ concept of habit before Parsons recast it in reflectively normative terms (Camic, 1986: 1060). Moreover, strategy appears more suitable to analyzing the practices of those possessing capital and/or power, than to the socially dominated. Thus, in Bourdieu’s examinations of the intellectual field, cultural field, etc., the dominated do not figure at all.

It is beyond our present scope to analyse this disjuncture in detail. My point is simply to note that of Bourdieu’s three ‘process’ agency concepts, strategy, despite its phenomenological sounding description (‘feel for the game’ etc.) is derived from a non-phenomenological premise concerning ends rather than
process, and hence does not sit comfortably with the phenomenologically-based habitus and practical logic. For this reason, strategy is non-essential to the understanding of habitus.

The Habitus and Practices of China’s Unionists

I’d like to illustrate the discussion with a case study of China’s trade unionists. Space limitation dictates that the exposition is schematic, but hopefully that does not detract from its demonstrative value.

In keeping with the interpretation of habitus as an objectivist concept, as exemplified by Bourdieu’s description of it as ‘internalized history’ and a ‘structure’ ‘structured’ by the conditions of the relevant social (class, group, institutional) milieu, it is necessary to begin with these formative conditions. Consider first the union’s structural-institutional conditions. The Chinese Communist Party (hereinafter CCP or Party) regime comprises various ‘systems’, including the Party, the administration, and the ‘mass organizations’ of which the union is one. All systems are staffed from a unified pool of cadres, with the Party wielding nomenklatura control. Many cadres remain in the same system for life, but transfers across systems also happen. In the (state) enterprise, the aforementioned three systems are headed by the Party secretary, the manager, and the union chair, who is a half-grade below the other two in rank. The union chair is nominally ‘elected’ by the workers, but actually appointed by the Party. Unions are operationally under the ‘dual leadership’ of the Party and the super-ordinate union, in that order of priority. Union members pay no dues. Two percent of the enterprise’s total wage bill is disbursed as the union’s revenue, irrespective of membership. This is shared with the territorial unions up the hierarchy.

Next, consider the union’s history. Coming to power in 1949 by means of a peasant army, the CCP regime created a working class of rural migrants through its industrialization drive. The All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU), nominally revived from its 1920s roots, was actually a newly-created organization, and tasked to ensure labour discipline; to be accomplished not so much through coercion as by means of having the union play a part in the enterprise’s inheritance of an ancient tradition to act as a ‘parent authority’ for the workers (Lau, 2001b). In the 1950s, two ACFTU leaders were successively purged for ‘syndicalism’ (demanding operational autonomy for the union, i.e. restricting the Party’s ‘dual leadership’ to important matters). Afterwards, unionists would refer even the minutest daily operational issues to the Party for instructions. In the factional struggles of the Cultural Revolution, the ACFTU was dissolved altogether until its restoration in 1978. In the 1980s, ‘dual leadership’ over the union was relaxed, but only to a limited degree. Since 4 June 1989, union operational autonomy has become a dead issue.

We now examine the unionists’ habitus as the mechanism through which they are constituted as agents, in a way vertically explained by the above historical-structural-institutional conditions. In doing so, the unionists’ practices
generated by it are also shown. This practical instead of corporeal interpretation specifies habitus into three interlinked components, all of a non-reflectively cognitive nature without absolutely ruling out awareness. The nature of my fieldwork was not conducive to extended observation of physical deportments. This does not, however, detract from the case study given the role of physical deportments in my interpretation.

The most striking belief-premise is the unionists’ self-definition as and identification with what, for want of a better term, I call the state managerial corps. As noted, all cadres come from the same pool; moreover, many are Party members. In the wider context of the political culture of reliance upon ‘parent authorities’ (Lau, 2001b), these factors have produced the above self-definition-identification among all cadres, despite the existence of conflicts of interests between different bureaucracies. In one municipal district, an administrative department overseeing 30 enterprises formed itself into a corporation, which was managed by a branch of the local Party Committee. A branch member-cum-veteran unionist was assigned as the corporation’s union chair, hence simultaneously straddling the Party, administrative and union systems. He related a case in which 25 workers lost a labour dispute court case against management. Regarding the workers’ case as groundless, he commented: ‘in the end, we won’. As the workers’ union chair, he identified instead with the ‘we’. I interpret this ‘we’ as referring not so much to management as to the state managerial corps as a whole (cf. the unionist’s current threefold position). In another case, a foreign investor owed the workers four months’ wages. The district union chair spoke to him and was told of cash-flow problems. The unionist was given the investor’s list of debtors, and successfully made use of his connections as a cadre to chase up most of the receivables. As agreed, the investor used half of it to partly pay off the workers. The unionist feared potential unrest, but his taking up of a managerial task (solving cash-flow problems) is incomprehensible unless viewed in the light of the ‘we’ identification.

Despite grumbling about the Party (for example, for weakening the union for the sake of reforms and making its job difficult), a second belief-premise consists of the conviction that the union is led by it. It is the Party that defines the state managerial corps’ goal, and ‘the duty of the union is to … ensure … the attainment of the Party’s objective’ which constitutes ‘the interests of the state’. The third belief-premise concerns the unionists’ view of their mission. As seen, the union was founded, not on the basis of workers’ spontaneous collective actions, but by state fiat. Hence, unionists do not see their mission as representing the workers; instead, their Party-defined mission is to manage the workers on behalf of the collective elite so as to facilitate the achievement of the Party’s objective. Since 1992, the Party’s objective has been to establish the ‘socialist market economy’, resulting in widespread layoffs and disputes. ‘We spend a lot of time explaining to workers the demands of a market economy.’ ‘The task of the union today is to harmonize labour relations for the purpose of economic development.’ In this harmonization, unionists ‘do not go on
strike. On the contrary, you work upon the employees’, i.e. pacify them in case of unrest or potential unrest.

Of the aforementioned belief-premises, the first lies in the deepest non-reflective layer of the unionists’ habitus. It never surfaced directly. In pre-fieldwork research and during the fieldwork itself, various jigsaw pieces appeared. It was the cursory but revelatory ‘in the end, we won’ remark that finally made them fall into place. Why would unionists who otherwise harbour discontent with the Party and management still express such great commitment and loyalty to the Party-defined policies-objectives without any feeling of being used like a tool? Vested interests are involved, but for many lowly grassroots unionists, they are meagre and disproportionate to the intensity of their belief-premises. Similarly, why did unionists who could show parent-authoritarian compassion for suffering workers never once impress upon me that they saw themselves as representing the workers, but instead took such a natural managerial attitude from the state’s standpoint? Without the ‘we’ identification, this would not have made sense. The belief-premise concerning the unionists’ mission was also not articulated directly. But it non-reflectively (sometimes even quasi-reflectively) underpins the unionists’ various reflective formulations of what the tasks of the union are. The second belief-premise is the most consciously held, probably because the Party’s leadership is a value stressed not only in official propaganda, but also in the formal and informal training of cadres.

The most striking perception-appreciation is the ubiquitous sense of the union’s powerlessness, a consequence of the Party’s policies both past and present. Many enterprises default on paying the union. One unionist states self-pitifully: ‘The union is a pauper union, management regards you as superfluous, workers see you as useless.’ ‘Superfluous’ because the cost is now seen as unnecessary; ‘useless’ because without revenue the union lacks funds, for instance, to help out needy workers. Another perception-appreciation is the unionists’ sense of reliance on the Party. This is partly based upon the above second belief-premise, and partly a corollary of the sense of powerlessness.

Turning to the practical sense of objective possibilities and of the forthcoming, in theory, the Party appoints the union chair in consultation with the super-ordinate union. In practice, the latter is often informed ex post facto only. One unionist sighs: ‘Can you oppose?’ Past experience tells him that whatever the Party says in theory, the practice remains unchanged, and it’s pointless to fuss about it. Instead of opposing the Party, unionists ‘actively seek the Party’s leadership … make it understand our work, support our work’. Why? Underpinned by the sense of powerlessness, unionists sense that ‘asking the secretary to speak [for us] carries more weight’. One unionist relates how once a profitable enterprise refused to pay the union. He turned to the Party secretary at the next higher level, who made the manager pay up. Another relates how in the early 1980s, on the Party’s instruction, union reform was hotly discussed. At one training course, a veteran unionist warned the class in a rhyming metaphor: ‘The old peacock [i.e. the union] spreads its tail. What one-sided
coquetry!' His practical sense told him of the futility of becoming heady with proposing reform to the Party. The union's subsequent history has borne him out.

It can be seen that within the state managerial corps, unionists comprise the dominated. They loyally accept their subordination in their daily practices, generated non-reflectively by their very own habitus. These practices contribute to the reproduction of the above historical-structural-institutional conditions, and so on.

Conclusion

Habitus is a powerful concept of social agency, but its value has been depreciated by the confusion surrounding it in relation to both its theoretical status and value and its conceptual formulation-usage. This article attempts to rectify this by providing a double-level interpretation. First, in rejecting the interpretation of it as a ‘transcending’ marriage of phenomenological social constructivism and structuralism and the critique of it as reductionist, I present a critical realist case for it as a non-reductionist objectivist concept. Second, with reference to Merleau-Ponty and Husserl, I conceptualize habitus, not as corporeal automatism, but as practical sense emergent from experience. For this reason and, secondarily, in order to safeguard the specific explanatory value of the concept, the equation of habitus to cultural capital is rejected. Consistently with the practical conceptualization, the ‘contents’ of habitus are specified as comprising three interlinked non-reflectively cognitive components, and physical deportments and the like are conceived of as objectifications of habitus instead of being its component elements. This specification also enables a more precise operationalization of the concept to enhance empirical research. Finally, I argue that the concept of strategy is non-essential to the understanding of habitus.

In the case study, the interpretation of habitus as an objectivist concept requires an examination of the formative conditions of the habitus of China’s unionists as ‘internalized history’ and ‘structured structure’. The unionists’ habitus is examined in terms of the above three components, with their interlinkages explained. The analysis concludes on a note highlighting the value of habitus in explaining social reproduction from the agency angle.

This article’s thesis is bound to be contested. Hopefully, it will stimulate debate constructive to the further development of Bourdieu’s influential concept.

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Notes

1 Bourdieu’s critics equate determinism to reductionism (e.g. The Friday Morning Group, 1990: 204–5). Bourdieu is also compared to Giddens (Archer, 1995, 2000; Mouzelis, 1995, 2000; Parker 2000; Sewell, 1992), but in contrast to Giddens, Bourdieu remains an objectivist.

2 All unattributed references are to Bourdieu. Publication date of the English edition is given. Original publication dates, for Bourdieu and all other references, are given in the bibliography.

3 These meanings are ultimately self-deriving and subjective (‘his own’ – cf. Archer, 1995: 13, 60, 99).

4 The intransitive dimension of knowledge refers to the external world that exists independently of our transitive knowledge of it.

5 I am imposing these critical realist concepts on Bourdieu, but they are consistent with his views. Incidentally, Bourdieu (1992) critiques Aristotelian substantialism, which he mysteriously labels as ‘realism’.

6 Wacquant (1992: 9–11) at points seems close to realizing this. But he insists on the false claim.

7 An emergent stratum (e.g. the biological) can be vertically explained by the stratum from which it emerges and on which it depends (e.g. the chemical), but possesses emergent powers in the form of causal mechanisms which are irreducible to the mechanisms of the latter stratum.

8 Horizontally because they and the economic ontologically presuppose one another.

9 In passing, it should be remarked that while Archer’s (1995, 2000) concepts of ‘personal identity’, ‘social identity’ and ‘social actor’ may seem relevant to this theorization, in positing self-reflexive evaluation of opportunity costs, they are actually antithetical to habitus.

10 I would like to clarify what I understand by objectivism. It involves an insistence on providing non-self-deriving explanations. For instance, the quest to understand what lies anterior to singularity involves an objectivistic attitude, but to say that God created the universe at that moment does not, since creation explains itself. Thus, whereas the kind of non-reductionist objectivism envisaged here does not reify structure or deny agency, it rejects leaving the latter as an unexplained (in the just-mentioned sense) quality. This is another reason why Archer’s theory of agency remains unsatisfactory, for its assertion of the ‘innovativeness’, ‘unpredictability’ and ‘voluntarism’ of social agential powers retains more of that quality than is warranted by the concept of emergence invoked by her.

11 Supporters such as Swartz (1997) gloss over Bourdieu’s inconsistency by additively incorporating the corporeal and cognitive dimensions.

12 Ostrow (1990: 13) claims that ‘Experience is necessarily corporeal.’ Just to mention the experience of fear that he cites (p. 2), it is clearly non-corporeal since the psychological is an emergent stratum. Conflating different strata/categories, the reductionist nature of Ostrow’s claim is evident.

13 Lash (1993) similarly distinguishes between habitus’ ‘reception’ and ‘production’ sides, but equating habitus to cultural capital, he compares the latter to Chomskyan competences (so does Bourdieu [1994: 14] himself). I argue that
habitus should be distinguished from cultural capital, in which case habitus' dispositions, at least as far as the underprivileged are concerned (e.g. 'this is not for the likes of us'), are non-enabling constraints, and hence cannot be regarded as Chomskyan competences, though in the case of the privileged they may be enabling. Thus, 'generate' here is used without any necessary Chomskyan connotation.

14 In many of my case study interviews, researchers and respondents engaged in wide-ranging conversation, sometimes going beyond the research. Through this process, the interviewees' non-reflective dimension sometimes surfaced spontaneously. Bourdieu (1990a: 294) rightly critiques the inability of survey questionnaires to elicit habitus’ practical sense. However, my fieldwork casts doubts on his dismissal of in-depth interviews for invariably producing 'official accounts'.

15 The study originated as a general investigation into China’s urban labour situation under the impact of market-oriented reforms. It involved research into the existing literature, documentary data (official documents, journalistic and other types of reports), discussion with Hong Kong labour activists knowledgeable about China’s labour situation, and fieldwork undertaken in 1998–9: interviews with 12 unionists and five officials and scholars in three cities, whose identities will have to be kept confidential. Only fieldwork data is cited in the present article. All unattributed quotes are from the interviewees (quotes from different interviewees are kept separate). Since this is not a study of China’s unions as such, no specialist literature is referenced. It should be noted that in China, unofficial unions are illegal, hence ‘union’ and ‘unionist’ refer to official ones. Grassroots unions (in work establishments) are led by territorial (not industrial) unions. The national organ is the All-China Federation of Trade Unions. Its acronym ACFTU is also used here to refer to official unions overall.

16 The order of exposition is the reverse of the order of discovery. I first learnt about the unionists’ practices, attempting to make sense of them. Theorization was based on reflecting upon what the interviews revealed.

17 ‘Managerial’ refers to the regime’s goal (now partially abandoned) of establishing a managed society and economy.

18 These interests are straightforward material privileges gained over the rest of the population. For instance, the stipulation that enterprises pay for the union’s revenue is guaranteed only on the Party’s authority. The theoretical disjuncture between illusio-strategy and habitus-practical logic has previously been noted. While space forbids an analysis of the issue, I’d like to point out that the unionists’ material interests do not constitute any intra-regime field/game-specific illusio as conceived by Bourdieu. Neither the categories of 'statist capital' (1994) and 'political capital' (1991) nor that of 'political field' (1991) and 'bureaucratic field' (1994) are useful for the analysis of China’s unions and unionists.

References


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