Key Concepts in Critical Social Theory

Symbolic Power/Symbolic Violence

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Symbolic Power/Symbolic Violence

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In the work of Pierre Bourdieu, who first formulated these concepts, symbolic power and symbolic violence are used interchangeably. I will suggest here that we can usefully use the two terms to refer to and distinguish two quite different phenomena but first we must consider Bourdieu's singular usage.

Symbolic power is a concept which Bourdieu uses to challenge both the neglect of questions of representation and symbolic culture in many analyses of power, politics and inequality, and the neglect of questions of power and politics in many analyses of representation and symbolic culture. Language, discourse (see discourse) and symbolic culture play a crucial role in our society in defining situations or 'framing' reality and thereby shaping social practices and institutions, he notes, but the practice of defining and constructing is by no means an open or equal process. Some social positions and social groups are sanctioned to make definitions. Others are not. The medical profession is sanctioned to define individuals as 'ill' or 'well', for example, and in some cases 'sane' or 'insane', often with quite considerable consequences. Officially defining an individual 'ill' (in the form of a doctor's note), for example, thereby grants them the legal right to take time off work without fear of punishment. If a lay member of the public makes the same diagnosis it has no equivalent weight. Similarly, if a psychiatrist (or in terms of UK law, two psychiatrists) defines an individual 'mentally ill', and specifically if they suggest that the individual would benefit from treatment, that individual can be compulsorily detained in a mental hospital for up to six months and compulsorily treated. If, by contrast, the diagnosed individual declares that they are sane or perhaps that it is the psychiatrist who is ill, their definition does not carry the same weight. Some agents, to reiterate, are sanctioned to make judgements and impose definitions/categories so that their words, at least within the domains where they are sanctioned, carry more power than those of others.

There is a clear overlap here with Foucault's arguments on 'power/knowledge' and 'régimes of truth' (see **power/knowledge**). Bourdieu is more concerned, however, to engage with the philosophical theory of speech acts and with the appropriation of that idea within sociology. The theory of speech acts suggests that words 'do things', that speaking is a way of acting and indeed is the form assumed by most action, including acts of great social significance. Many discourse and conversation analysts have argued, with a critical eye on their counterparts in 'macro-sociology', that most of the key 'big' processes of the social world are achieved through talk (see discourse). Wars are declared, parliaments dissolved, laws changed, and so on, all by way of talk. Bourdieu agrees with this, on one level, but has a number of reservations. In the first instance, though, for example, wars may be officially started with a declaration of war – 'we declare war on you' – what is often of more significance for social science is the background context of factors which lead up to a situation of conflict where such a declaration might be made. More importantly for us here, however, Bourdieu is concerned that the words 'we declare war on you' only have the effect of starting a war if one happens to be a political or military leader, sanctioned by the 'we' to take this decision and publicly declare it.[224] On this point Bourdieu takes his lead from the original philosophical theorist of speech acts, J.L. Austin (1971), who referred to the 'felicity conditions' presupposed by such acts. All it takes to name a ship, Austin notes, is utterance of the words 'I name this ship the good ship whatever', but for those words to do the trick, to work their magic, certain (felicity) conditions must have been met. Principally one must be the person appointed to name the ship. What Austin identifies here, Bourdieu notes, is the existence and importance of a whole web of institutional conditions which invest speech acts and lend them their performative magic. This web of connections is the

basis of symbolic power.

If we return to the example of the psychiatrist, for example, his or her power depends upon the fact that s/he is officially sanctioned by the psychiatric and medical establishment to practise psychiatry, a sanction which, in turn, is conditional upon him or her having completed an officially recognized education in psychiatry and general medicine. The psychiatrist has been examined numerous times over by the medical authorities before they are granted the certificate that affords them the power to get a job which, in turn, affords them the power to deprive others of their liberty. And the medical establishment itself has to be recognized by the state, which exercises an effective monopoly on the legitimate use of violence (which psychiatry calls upon sometimes to enforce its decisions) and symbolic power. The right of the psychiatric establishment to sanction its practioners to act in particular ways is itself sanctioned by the state, which itself, of course, at least nominally seeks a sanction from the wider public (who recognize its power and sanction specific managerial elites by way of their vote). The history of psychiatry is, to some extent, a history of struggle by medics to achieve this sanction and fend off the claims of competing authorities (for example, legal and religious professionals) (Scull, 1993; Busfield, 1989; Porter, 1987).

In making these claims Bourdieu is walking a thin but very important line. On one hand he is arguing that symbolic power, in the final instance, depends upon recognition, or perhaps rather 'misrecognition', by those subject to it. Its power is that of a self-fulfilling prophecy and is dependent upon our unwitting complicity and legitimation. Certain social agents are empowered, in part, by our belief that they are powerful. On the other hand, however, Bourdieu is seeking to challenge those who would seek to reduce, for example, the power of the psychiatrist over his/her patient to the interactional dynamics effected between them in any particular encounter. The power of the psychiatrist derives from their position in a dynamic, historically evolving field. In making this point, Bourdieu is seeking to challenge what he takes to be a naïve overemphasis on language and symbolism in interactionist sociology, linguistic philosophy and, more recently, the post-structuralism of Judith Butler.[225] Moreover, his argument stems from his philosophy of science. Many discourse analysts, following what can only be described as a positivist and behaviourist conception of social science, justify their tendency to ignore wider institutional conditions of discourse on the grounds that analysis can only focus upon conditions which are visible and thus observable. If 'institutions' are important, they argue, then we should be able to see (or hear) that in the 'real' interactions between agents. Bourdieu, rightly in my view, views this as an out-moded view of science, an 'epistemological obstacle', to use Bachelard's (2002) term (see **epistemological break**). Modern science is preoccupied with the invisible, he notes. It is constituted by the discovery of hidden forces behind the world of immediate perception. And sociology should be too. Of course, we have to prove the existence and efficacy of these forces, but that does not mean limiting our focus to the minutia of discourse.

As noted above, Bourdieu tends to use the terms 'symbolic power' and 'symbolic violence' interchangeably to describe this power. If there is any difference in his usage it is that 'symbolic violence' sometimes emphasizes the way in which social agents, by virtue of their socialization and historical symbolic struggles, come to accept the catgeories and symbolic systems which, in turn, are imposed upon them – and whose power they unwittingly sanction. However, I would like to suggest that we reserve the term 'symbolic power' for this, and that we use the term 'symbolic violence' to denote instances where particular groups are systematically denied the degree of recognition enjoyed by others (see **recognition**), that is, instances where they are devalued or stigmatized. It seems to me confusing to have two terms applying to the same thing, without any obvious distinction, and 'symbolic violence' is not always well suited to situations which cause no obvious pain (psychological or physical) to those subject to it. By contrast 'symbolic violence' does seem an appropriate term to capture the felt and/or lived suffering of those devalued, stigmatized or otherwise denied a basic level of recognition by their wider society. Bourdieu's later study, *The Weight of the World* provides many examples of this lived sense of devaluation, as indeed do Goffman's (1961, 1969) studies of *Asylums* and *Stigma*.

224 It may also be necessary, of course, that the agent in question has gone through a series of specified procedures before performing their (speech) act. The sanction to perform certain acts and make certain deci-

sions is usually subject to the proviso that they are made in particular ways, following particular safeguards.

225 Butler criticizes Bourdieu's emphasis on institutions in her *Excitable Speech* (Butler, 1997b). Her emphasis is much more upon the performativity of power in situ. To my mind she makes just the error Bourdieu is pointing to, in a major way. Although there is some element of reply to Butler in Bourdieu's *Masculine Domination* he died before this argument could be resolved. Although I accept Butler's point that Bourdieu's schema sometimes leaves little room for resistance, recent work has suggested that resistance is not as free of 'sanction' as Butler suggests (Lovell, 2003) and my vote is squarely with Bourdieu on this matter. For some discussion of Butler's ideas see the entries on performativity and sex/gender distinction.

Further Reading

The two key texts of Bourdieu's on these issues are *Reproduction* (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1996) which tends to use the language of 'symbolic violence' and *Language and Symbolic Power* (Bourdieu, 1992b), which tends to use the language of 'symbolic power'. John Austin's (1971) *How to Do Things With Words* is a fascinating read and an important background text for a proper understanding of Bourdieu's conception of symbolic power.

- symbolic violence
- sanctions
- speech acts
- psychiatrists
- symbolic power and violence
- speech act theory
- psychiatry

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