

# Sartre, Bourdieu, and Ethics as the Realpolitik of History

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The relative absence of conversation between students of Pierre Bourdieu and students of Jean-Paul Sartre is not surprising, given that almost all of Bourdieu's explicit engagements with Sartre's work tend to be critical. Although it is therefore understandable that serious dialogue between students of each figure has hardly begun, it is ultimately unjustifiable and unfortunate: unjustifiable because the existence of very clear and deep parallels nullifies our right to trust Bourdieu's own view that he rejects and departs from Sartre; unfortunate because the most commonly acknowledged shortcomings or ambiguities of each correspond quite usefully to what are perhaps the most compelling elements in the work of the other.

More specifically, Bourdieu's theoretical conception of social reproduction is often criticized as pessimistic toward the possibility of resistance, at the same time that a work such as Sartre's *Critique of Dialectical Reason* is sometimes read as a work in which the "bleak pessimism of [his] existential period is replaced by the ferocious world of competition and violence." That is, if a common dissatisfaction with Bourdieu's social theory is that it fails to offer any unique inroad to political change, while a work such as the *Critique* is criticized by some—including Bourdieu—as too romantically sanguine toward revolutionary resistance, then Bourdieu's self-distancing from Sartre is worse than unreliable. For, it seems a fair wager that this very distance marks the space within which a more revolutionary-strategic Bourdieu might be found alongside a more empirically sober critique of dialectical reason.

This paper proceeds as follows. In the first section I provide an overview of some of the most salient theoretical links between Bourdieu and Sartre, in order to build a foundation for moving forward.<sup>[1]</sup> In the second section, I reconstruct the concept of symbolic violence halfway between Bourdieu and Sartre, and demonstrate its relation to history and social reproduction. In the third and concluding section, I build from the groundwork of the preceding sections a stylized conception of a politicized ethics as a *realpolitik* of history, in order to demonstrate the fertility of, and one future direction for, the study of Bourdieu and Sartre as closely related intellectual figures.

## I. Social Reproduction as Dialectic

It is necessary at the outset to briefly consider whether the project proposed here is not doomed

from the start, as some might very well believe, given Bourdieu's own statements about Sartre. *The Logic of Practice*, for instance, begins with a critique of Sartre, who Bourdieu sees as an exemplar of the "Imaginary Anthropology of Subjectivism."<sup>[2]</sup> There, he mockingly refers to the *Critique of Dialectical Reason* as an "imaginary novel of the death and resurrection of freedom." In fact, this is not the only time that Sartre is cast in the role of negative exemplar. Where Bourdieu takes up the question of the literary field, he opposes his own analysis to Sartre's, which, again, is seen as a short-sighted commitment to the subjective heroism of the "*projet originel*."<sup>[3]</sup> From Bourdieu's point of view, the Sartrean subject possesses an unrealistically sovereign consciousness. Of course, a major component of the existentialist gesture is the insistence on an inescapable kernel of freedom, and thus responsibility, in human action. However, to careful readers of the *Critique*, Bourdieu's aggressive and pronounced criticism strikes one as utterly perplexing. Bourdieu seems to take Sartre's existentialist inflections as representative of a naïve social ontology in which the subject condemned to be free faces no unconscious, socio-structural conditionings. However, if the *Critique* is a novel about anything, it is precisely the story of freedom's thoroughly conditioned relationship to the surroundings in which it emerges. In particular, the claim of this section is that Bourdieu and Sartre have a significant and wide area of common ground that amounts to a compellingly stylized framework for conceptualizing social reproduction—the self-defensive temporal consistency of institutions—in and through history.

This focus on the dialectical interwovenness of the mental with the objective, and the practical with the ideal is the most significant and foundational linkage between the projects of Bourdieu and Sartre: the theoretical insistence that the social experience is a dialectical one, in which the material or so-called external environment (the character and distribution of tangible things as well as the socio-symbolic order) structures the individual perceptions and choices of agents, perceptions and choices that, in turn, structure the external environment. There is nothing particularly original about this basic acknowledgement, but the point is that both Bourdieu and Sartre raise this fact to the level of an absolute imperative for honest and rigorous social theory, and each one sought to draw from it more provocative conclusions for theorizing the political problems of modern society.

The basics of Bourdieu's vocabulary are now increasingly well-rehearsed: in his practical engagement with the world, the individual is to be conceived as a *habitus*, a set of durable dispositions and generative principles of perception learned and earned through participation in the world, which shapes the contours of what is thinkable, preferable, or appropriate; our material and mental being in the world is a development of the world, and therefore because our actions are made of the world, their products or outcomes are necessarily in some degree constricted to the limits of that world. In its turn, the habitus is actively immersed in that world, structurally assigned to the perpetual creation and recreation of the world that it embodies.

However, agents are distributed differentially across social space. The world that is the material of our durable dispositions is a differentiated world of semi-distinct clusters of particular material

and socio-symbolic orders. Because of this differentiation—in a class society, stratification—a habitus relates not to “the world” as such but to the *field* that is the context for its particular embodiment. A field is a social space characterized, dialectically of course, by the fact that a set of agents identify as playing the same game, agreeing implicitly to a set of unspoken, practiced rules that give integrity to their actions in the world. The field is the structure within which the habitus is constituted, yet the field is nothing more than the systemic coherence of the interrelationships of the agents who are invested in it because they have been invested by it. As the playing field metaphor suggests—Bourdieu returned again and again to metaphors of sport—it is a space in which agents compete.

For what do they compete? Within fields, the distribution of habitus is associated with a distribution of *capital*, personal or group reserves of scarce resources which other agents in the field also find valuable because of their homologous habituation to structurally similar external conditions. The economic field is the easy example: agents are distinguished by their possession of economic capital (money, tools, labor power, networks), and the field maintains consistency because of the durable orchestration of individual habitus, which is the condition that ensures economic capital is perceived as valuable and thus desirable. A shared investment in the value of capital endows it with the property that its possession can be used to command the action of others.

The originality of this model is its generalized extension to other non-economic or even anti-economic spheres. Consider for instance, the constitution of a literary field in the time of Flaubert.<sup>[4]</sup> As economic development brings the hope of new opportunities to relatively impoverished students from the provinces or the Parisian lower-classes, the labor market for writers and artists becomes saturated. As a result, this educated milieu becomes economically alienated yet they maintain the romantic satisfaction of participating, at however low a level, of the artistic culture epitomized by the famous salons. In this “society within society,” the economic world is “reversed,” and the principle conferring capital toward an agent in this field is precisely anti-commercialism and independence from economic rewards: the more pronounced the distance from the vulgarities of economical capital, the greater the accumulation of *cultural capital*. Thus, the extension of the concept of capital does not reflect a pan-economism, but rather the legitimate possibility of constructing non-economic worlds—on the necessary empirical conditions established by a certain conceptualization of how a generalized theory of capital functions. It is really the opposite of a cynical insistence on the inescapable ubiquitousness of Capital, but rather an empirically rigorous insistence that strategies for constructing new fields in opposition to economism are nonetheless subject to generalized capital constraints.

Although in no easy or straightforward way did Bourdieu profess a philosophy of history, I suggest that in this framework, history is the fact that temporality or perpetuity would seem to be implied in the most elementary unit of social existence. That is, because human existence as a relation between the material and the ideal, the “natural” and “cultural,” is irreducibly a circular

*movement*, involving one term that ineluctably borrows from another which itself runs on the resources of its debtor, it implies that the present is precisely the perpetuity of alternating displacements between material, socio-symbolic objective structures (things) and “internal” cognitive structures of perception and valuation.

This last point will be expanded later, but for now, it suffices to note that this circularity between objective and subjective structures is, for Bourdieu, the framework that properly captures the stabilities and instabilities of social organization over time. The participation of the habitus in quasi-autonomous fields narrows the potentially infinite range of options facing a free subject, by forcing that subject to acknowledge probabilities of profit-making determined by the expectations and demands by those who hold whatever in that particular field is perceived to be valuable. At a superficial level, this accounts for many decisions of mundane life strategy (I gain skills in order to gain a better job) but at a more profound level it accounts for the very range of what is thinkable. This narrowing or structuring effect will be what permits a conception of history as having at once intelligible continuity and an essentially variable trajectory.

Although Sartre’s vocabulary is idiosyncratic, with different accents and emphases than those of Bourdieu, my simple claim here is that a deep homology exists between the circular perpetuity of the habitus/field mutual-constitution and that most elemental building-block of the *Critique of Dialectical Reason*: the dialectic of interiority and exteriority, of praxis and the practico-inert. Although there is nothing too remarkable about Sartre and Bourdieu merely having in common a dialectical position, it is necessary to call forth and establish the analogous terms between which this joint vision is to be reflected, if only because the dearth of such conversations in the scholarly literatures suggests that it is far from obvious. In doing so, I will anticipate some of the more interesting and even less obvious points of connection I take up in the theoretical section.

Consider Sartre’s own words, which I quote at some length:

Through tran-substantiation, the project inscribed by our bodies in a thing takes on the substantial characteristics of the thing without altogether losing its original qualities. It thus possesses an inert future within which we have to determine our future. The future comes to man through things in so far as it previously came to things through man. Significations as passive impenetrability come to replace man in the human universe: he delegates his powers to them... It also means however, that these heavy, inert objects lie at the basis of a community whose bonds are, in part, bonds of interiority.<sup>[5]</sup>

It is hard to resist reading in these lines a close approximation of the relationship between habitus and field. It is perhaps no coincidence that Bourdieu in several places uses the term transubstantiation to denote the social magic whereby individuals use a socially accepted power to “delegate” or invest capital into an institution or ritual practice and produce legitimately powerful, inert symbolic creations. Despite the anachronism, one can read Sartre responding to Bourdieu’s criticism:

It would be quite wrong to interpret me as saying that man is free in all situations, as the Stoics claimed. I mean the exact opposite: all men are slaves in so far as their life unfolds in the practico-inert field and in so far as this field is always conditioned by scarcity. In modern society, the alienation of the exploited and that of the exploiters are inseparable... This means that everyone struggles against an order which really and materially crushes his body and which he sustains and strengthens by his individual struggle against it. Everything is born at this line which simultaneously separates and unites huge physical forces in the world of inertia and exteriority (in so far as the nature and orientation of the energy transformations which characterize them give a definite statute of improbability to life in general and to human life in particular) and practical organisms (in so far as their praxis tends to confirm them within their structure of inertia, that is to say, in their role as energy converters.<sup>[6]</sup>

Thus not only do we find specific clarifications to the effect that Sartre is concerned with something radically different than an imaginary anthropology of subjectivism, we also find attention to differential distributions of objective probabilities or life-chances assigned to different sectors of humanity; we find intimations of that typically Bourdieusian insight that a condition for domination is shared schemes of perception between oppressor and oppressed; and finally, also condensed in this passage we find the idea that in differentiated societies, the functions of different sectors tend to be distributed in such a way that 1.) “struggle against” amounts to *strengthening* of the social whole in general and 2.) the specific divisions of praxis across classes, the roles of energy conversion typically assigned to particular subdivisions within the structure of society, tend to strengthen and preserve the particular class structuration of that society.

In fact, Sartre might as well be writing a summary of the graphical figures in a book such as *Distinction* or *Homo Academicus*, wherein Bourdieu used a technique called correspondence analysis to reveal the global interrelationships that exist between position-takings (tastes or political ideology, say) and class position (indicated by occupation, geography, etc.). The graphical output of such analysis reveals the two most explanatory dimensions that simplify multi-dimensional data by giving two intersecting lines that divide clouds of these variables in spatial relation to one another.<sup>[7]</sup> In a sense, these intersecting lines represent the line(s) at which, as Sartre points out, everything is born. The relational presuppositions of this analysis, what drew Bourdieu to them, similarly reflect Sartre’s description of them as that which simultaneously separates and unites. In other words, the reality Sartre seeks to describe here is precisely that which Bourdieu famously analyzed in books such as *Distinction*: the class divisions which structure modern society in such a way that material forces channel free praxis into a dynamic of self-perpetuating circular feedbacks.

## II. Symbolic Violence and Ethics in History

History, I therefore submit, is the circular consistency of the present achieved as a kind of profit

accrued to the past (the practico-inert, objective structures always “preceding” action at any concrete threshold) a sort of topologically apodictic result of its investing itself with itself and in doing so constituting a residual, negative spatial dimension—in the psychic topology Freud and Lacan simply call this the unconscious—which is the condition that makes it possible to speak of temporality. That set of practices which can be theoretically comprehended under this rubric (laboring on the practico-inert in order to preserve or strengthen the past in the present through this process of circular investment) we call symbolic violence. As a matter of nominalist, deductive necessity—which, so long as we with Bourdieu and Sartre insist on the dialectic, is now indistinguishable from what is called dialectical realism<sup>[8]</sup>—that whole set of practices which labor to cut, reverse, close, or otherwise short-circuit the circular circuit of investment that constitutes historical consistency. I propose to call ethics, as opposed to that which simply enacts that circular circuit, morality or the happy forms of symbolic violence. This is a somewhat paradoxical set of propositions, but as I will show, even this paradoxical character is a direct fulfillment of calls made quite explicitly by both Bourdieu and Sartre.

The exposition proceeds as follows. First, I establish the significance of symbolic violence as a particular process in which the set of morally appropriate actions for particular individuals is determined through a circular wedding of material resources with conceptual relations. Having demonstrated this complicity between morality and domination, I take up some rather enigmatic fragments from a note on ethics written by Bourdieu and Sartre’s *Notebooks for an Ethics* in order to show how a synthetic recasting of the concept of symbolic violence provides them with newfound coherence and fresh possibility. With this coherence in hand, I then turn back to Bourdieu, to show how ethics is properly understood as a *realpolitik* of history.

*Symbolic violence.* One of the concepts most commonly associated with Bourdieu is that of symbolic violence. However, it is not a great labor to reconstruct a similar theory from pages written by Sartre. For both, the dominant class of a particular society maintains their status by techniques that shape the range of “legitimate” conceptual relations (equivalences, oppositions, but perhaps most importantly moral weights that favor or hinder certain modes of action). In every case, it is the institution of an economy of symbolic goods built on normative social sanctions that are not explicitly backed by force, but are possible due to certain properties of deceptiveness inherent in languaged self-consciousness. For Bourdieu, this is most conveniently summarized in the notion of misrecognition, while for Sartre the term for such deceptiveness is “bad faith,” a commonality to which Bourdieu explicitly testifies.<sup>[9]</sup>

In social practices as diverse in importance as gift-exchange is to racism, a universal norm is promulgated and defended by a collective labor, which by perpetually recreating a particular distribution of incentives, sustains a misrecognition of plain facts. That which we call history—we might even say History—is a conceptual residue the possibility of which, the consistencies and inconsistencies of which, are due to the perpetual recreation, in all of the infinite minor tasks of everyday social life because, being in their very person the embodied, lived investment of the institution itself, have a natural alignment of interests with the institution that is both input



and output of its own organism.

In gift-exchange, a norm of routinized and practically calibrated reciprocal generosity, rooted in a self-interest in the limited interest of others, is collectively misrecognized as a spontaneous and free act of altruistic and disinterested expenditure.<sup>[10]</sup> Although gift-giving is governed by fairly exacting norms—too much, too little, or poor timing turn a gift into an offense—and despite that the gift confers a debt onto the recipient, the implicit rules of the practice require, lest the institution die from over-awareness of its own contradictions, that this truth be repressed.

Very significantly, time is the variable the value of which represents the degree that the logic of self-interested exchange is repressed in favor of the happy practical experience of altruism without reserve. This is evidenced by the fact that a return-gift delivered too quickly after the original gift is perceived as an offense, and on the other temporal extreme, the indefinite holding back of the return-gift may in some conditions confer on the original sender a continually increasing income of symbolic “credit granted to beneficence,” or under other conditions represent an affront to the sender’s honor.<sup>[11]</sup> In any event, the effect is to legitimate a form of symbolic domination, legitimate because enacted with the full practical consent of orchestrated habitus and symbolic because existing nowhere other than in the alignment of values and principles of perception, in which those possessing the material and symbolic resources of generosity keep others within a cycle of reciprocities that has the function of conserving the original distribution of resources.

The real difficulty is that this symbolic order of norms is a practico-inert institution that subjects have no choice but to support insofar as it is an institution that will have supported, often in the most material ways, the very existence of the subject’s organism. It is as if participation in the institution is by definition homogenous with existing insofar as existence is made by the institution and thus to preserve the institution is to preserve that which one is. Insofar as all the food eaten by a child effectively functions as a gift from the mother, to reject the institution of gift-exchange, to not pay the institution back for what it lent one is to literally debase oneself insofar as one’s own possibility has the structure of the gift. Thus, the minor but real moral pangs of denying all those simple requests, which Bourdieu often recalls, expressed by formulas such as “It wouldn’t hurt you to just...” is only the symbolic, normative space of the dialectical circle in which scarce material necessities constitute their opposite (ideal necessities). It is, therefore, a process in which the moral order (the discursive regime of moral weights dialectically woven with material incentives) achieves efficacy by a kind of practical participatory arrangement of symbolic relations that are constitutive and constituent of distributions in the practico-inert field.

If we compare this framework with an issue of even more pressing political import in the work of Sartre, we find the same circular map of the relation between symbolic domination and brute, physical oppression. In the *Notebook for an Ethics*, Sartre criticizes a statement by a one W.T. Couch, writing in defense of racial hierarchy:

Yet Couch rightly takes the values *of right and good* in a participatory sense. If Blacks have invented less than Whites, it is that they are less inventive; and if invention is a good, we have the proof that they are less good. In this way, concepts and values are a fixed and hierarchical series, and objects, just like men, participate in these concepts and values, just as Aristotelian matter participates in the substantial forms... And to see clearly in an unjustifiable situation, it is not sufficient that the oppressor look at it openly and honestly, he must also change the structure of his eyes. As long as he looks at it with a conceptualist apparatus, he will judge it to be acceptable and just. But he has breathed in conceptualism with the air of his time, for conceptualism is the philosophy of observation. If I observe that a balloon rises, I say that it rises because it is light. If I observe, as a child, that Blacks do not behave as we do, I say that is because they are Black. A changed point of view is required to be able to comprehend that the air carries the balloon up and that we require the Blacks to act as they do, because in both cases a determining factor is hidden.

[12]

A particular distribution of material resources and the leverage of brute force structure the objective probabilities attached to the success of initiatives defined as good (that is, symbolically or economically profitable) and in doing so determine a particular distribution of adjectives. The infernal circular proof in which Whites are demonstrably superior to Blacks is precisely of the same pattern as the moral tautology in which I cannot fail to return home without a gift for my parents because my person is literally by its very composition the gift my parents sent themselves through me. Blacks are inferior because they have been forcibly inserted into an order that confines them to objective factors defined as inferior, just as it is right for me to give a gift because I have been brought into an order that constitutes me through the gift. In each case moral force is derived, as the apodicticity of veiled conceptual relations, in the loop of a dialectic that is at once nominalist and realist.

*A paradoxical/impossible ethics.* Given the structural complicity between morality and domination—how *ought* and *is* mutually condition one another—it will become perfectly intelligible why both Bourdieu and Sartre make unfulfilled overtures toward a project of ethics characterized by paradox and impossibility, respectively.

“Any ethic which does not explicitly consider itself to be impossible *today* contributes to the alienation and the mystification of man,” Sartre writes in the *Notebooks*.<sup>[13]</sup> What could this mean? Such an ethic would coincide with the outside of the space of socially-sanctioned ritual as theorized by Bourdieu, a space of action he often calls the “unthinkable,” given that it is inconsistent with shared schemes of perception between actors and thus not socially profitable. Thus, a statement such as this one should not be read as some enigmatic, Derridaean “passion for the impossible,” but a fairly precise demarcation of the scope and location of properly ethical action: the doing of exactly what cannot be done, according to the directionality of a well-cultivated habitus. In the *Notebooks*, Sartre has a clear but inchoate intuition that genuine ethics must be an intervention in history that is distinct from mere morality, distinct from everything



within the charmed circle of actions consistent with the imperatives of the practico-inert: “(1) Absurdity and necessity of an ethics. (2) Immorality of ethics: values conceived as objectivity... An ethics of imperfection and the imperfection of ethics.”<sup>[14]</sup>

The paradox embedded in these words of Sartre, of course, is that ethics traditionally understood, in the superficial sense of “doing the right thing,” is, as we have seen in our discussion of symbolic violence, exactly the temporal glue that bonds the succession of apparently free and random social activity into a tightly reproduced system of domination. If a system of ethics is conceivable according to the generative structures we possess today, we know that the deck is stacked: by definition, it will be consistent with domination. This much seems fair, yet what could Sartre possibly have in mind with the absurdity of an ethics?

Given the preceding analysis of the ground shared by Bourdieu and Sartre, it will not seem too *ad hoc* to draw inspiration for this question from a similarly uncertain piece by Bourdieu. Published in *Practical Reason*, an essay entitled “A Paradoxical Foundation of Ethics” draws attention to the curious fact, noted earlier, that there always exists a self-interest in strategies of universalization that involve justifying one’s own actions on the grounds of a universal rule associated with a larger group. This tends to legitimate the action, accruing symbolic profit to the actor, while reinforcing the rule, accruing symbolic profits to the group. The only practical political argument Bourdieu makes in response to this is to call for critique combined with political activism, in order to create the “institutional means for a politics of morality.”<sup>[15]</sup>

However, if Sartre’s ethical pointers are too vague to be useful on their own, one could very well argue that Bourdieu’s pointer here, attached to a consideration of ethics, is both unrealistic and too easy. It is unrealistic only in the sense that the creation of such “institutional means” presupposes both non-institutional (say, mass support) and institutional (say, coalition building) means that may or may not be present. It is a fair and common kind of plea, but it seems to completely elide the unique problematic brought out by our analysis of symbolic violence: the problem of creating change when the means for its creation are already a stacked deck in favor of only those forms of change compatible with the material and symbolic conditions in which they emerge.

On the other hand, this political ethics of what Bourdieu calls a “realpolitik of reason and morality,” although it sounds fresh and provocative, is in its content a well-legitimated formula for committed intellectuals; that is, in a sense it is too easy (utopian, in Marx’s sense) to simply call for more critique in favor of institutional change. Leftist intellectuals have been doing this for quite some time, sometimes with success, but in the permissiveness of advanced liberal democracies it is not clear that such calls represent a serious threat to the established order, insofar as they are now quite a reliable element in that order.

Although Sartre’s beginnings in the *Notebooks* are fascinating yet unelaborated, whereas Bourdieu’s overtures toward a political ethics seem to fall short, with respect to originality and usefulness, of his other theoretical insights, they have been brought together here to serve as a

springboard for only one example of the potentially explosive synthetic visions that exist between the worlds of Bourdieu and Sartre. Based on the original impressions discussed in the opening of this article, that Bourdieu saw Sartre as too romantically and heroically “subjective” to be accurate, whereas Bourdieu has sometimes been seen as offering little advice for political resistance, I made the wager that for this very reason we might be able to cross-apply these antisymmetric strength/weakness structures.

Symbolic capital was the critical concept that permitted us to theorize symbolic violence as a dynamic and properly historical force—in the sense that its process was shown to coincide with a temporal spatiality, which we imagined topologically, and which, in that sense, represents the possibility of history—the diverse exchanges of which account for history as conceivable along the lines of continuous social reproduction. At the same time however, it was the Sartrean emphasis on disaggregating the dialectic into theoretically discrete totalizations built up from individual praxis that permitted us to locate more specifically individual praxis in its relation to the conceptual forces implied in a dialectical nominalism. It seems only logical—and the groundwork is already provided—to invest the latter insight with the former.

One argument, then, is that symbolic capital is the critical but hidden empirical variable that would be required to sustain a project such as the *Critique* as a rigorous program for a political philosophy. When symbolic capital is introduced as a variable that deserves empirical attention, the stage is set for what ought to be a top priority in political philosophy: a practical, strategic framework that does not have to sacrifice philosophical rigor, as commons oppositions between logic and practice would sometimes suggest.

Consider, for instance, the problem taken up especially by Sartre, that practico-inert objects are an exteriorization of praxis, and as such they contain an intentionality that constrains the range of possible actions at a given time. Although this is quite true and largely consistent with Bourdieu’s writings, what is not fully acknowledged in the framework of the *Critique* is that 1.) such instruments only command a particular kind of obedience when they are perceived by actors with principles of perception homologous to the creator of the machine, and 2.) the different possible uses will have variable ramifications depending on the relative quantity of capital possessed by the user. That is, a hammer in a workshop demands conformity to a particular mode of action, employing it to drive nails into wood, for instance, only to one who is first of all sufficiently oriented to carpentry but also sufficiently invested in carpentry to want to employ the hammer as its creator intended. For a philosopher or the carpenter’s ethnographer, an encounter with a hammer does not command usage in conformity with its design, it is rather a tool of endless philosophical or sociological meditations. Under other conditions and when perceived by agents with different principles of perception and different investments, it might become a weapon, for better or worse depending on how one hypothesizes the effects of the quantity of symbolic capital.

Thus, while there is little doubt that our material inventions turn back dialectically and become

conditions of our subsequent inventions, and that for both Bourdieu and Sartre this circularity is one of the characteristic processes by which social orders reproduce themselves over time, we can see that it is not a perfect circularity, that of all the infinitely diverse and overlapping circles that link the freedom of action to the obligations of freedom inscribed in things there is a very precarious parallax involved, a virtually infinite set of alternative perceptions linked to virtually infinite variation over the continuous variables describing the principles of perception peculiar to a particular habitus. The problem and paradox of modern life is that despite the historical proliferation of formal legal freedom to think creatively in the interstices of these parallax, there is nonetheless an astounding inertia to the social order, an awful kind of “path-dependence” as political scientists call it, in which the radical diversion of society’s trajectory is seen as either impossible or doomed to terrible consequences.

Investing the dialectic of praxis and the antidialectic of the practico-inert with the variable of symbolic capital allows us to begin conceptualizing a science of such transversals, an increasing specification of the conditions under which different transgressions of morality or otherwise unthinkable actions—an ethics of the impossible—produces desired effects in and through history.

In other words, the variable of symbolic capital permits the enigmas of a potential, Sartrean “ethical radicalism” to be operationalized as the strategic intervention in public life designed to plant dialectical ripples in history, by doing the wrong thing at all of the right times—a realpolitik of history. Although the full set of implications and hypotheses of this conclusion would require additional research, it will suffice to paint one possible, stylized portrait, and give a few specifications of what such an ethics might hold in store.

### **III. Conclusion: A Political Ethics as the Realpolitik of History**

We begin to see profane politics itself, insofar as it is represented by geographically distinct clusters of professionals with rational-legal authority to make decisions for communities, as a practico-inert institution founded not on the authentic pledge of a group to inscribe itself in things, but as a kind of negative pledge to delegate responsibility to others for particular matters, thus freeing oneself of freedom’s burden, in order to gain a false sense of justification for whatever “private” actions we take in “civil society.” That is, by delegating authority for the making of law and public policy to practico-inert political institutions, that which is not regulated by law earns a negative legitimacy: I have the right to buy whatever I want from whom I want to buy it, as long as I am not breaking the law. It is a statutory group-process on the model of the pledge in Sartre’s sense but the problem is that here we are far from Sartre’s heroic examples of the rebel groups in combat. That is, mainstream political institutions are practico-inert materializations of “pledges” by fused groups; but the problem is precisely that the freedom materialized is precisely those who already had it at the time of the pledge. This not only applies to mythical or empirical political “founders” but to the perpetual refoundings of everyday political life: on the one hand the history of the bureaucratic field demonstrates this delegation of

responsibility; on the other, we need look no further than wealthy elites who proudly testify to the most liberal political commitments—for instance, increased redistribution of their own income to low-income groups—as long as this means they can ignore the homeless on the street with good conscience, or that nobody will question the moral or political implications of their choice of a similarly wealthy spouse, or their provision to their children of highly scarce educational credentials.

We begin to modify our portrait of the morally and politically righteous individual: it is less and less a picture of the traditional activist—educated, persuasive, fighting for political change to promote the interests of the underprivileged, oppressed, or neglected—and more the image of pure social insensibility itself, application of tools for absolutely inappropriate ends, always doing the “unthinkable,” seeking out, with full responsibility and the anguish that comes with it, the absolutely inappropriate exploitation of opportunities. It is not the evil genius we see, but the unlikely genius, the Machiavellian social dialectician who knows the absolutely correct conditions under which the absolutely incorrect move produces maximum dialectical reverberations.

A more specific conclusion of this portrait—which should be interpreted as an empirical hypothesis—is that ethical radicalism implies strategies of living only “on the cusp” of all institutions to which one is attached.<sup>[16]</sup> That is, by avoiding at all costs a deep acculturation into any particular field, one not only seeks to protect one’s basic ability to see clearly but also one insulates oneself from the explicit and implicit incentive structures which channel individual efforts into the reproduction of the status quo. This is, perhaps, what Plato means when he has Socrates describe himself as *atopos*: the appropriate lifestyle for the philosopher is a minimization of the circulatory oscillations wherein hidden presuppositions (the world, the given, the practico-inert) is propped up by positive propositions which, by expending the minimum of resolve necessary for their own execution, feed back into an unquestioned because invisible sanctification of those presuppositions.

The meaning of *atopos* thus resonates with the topological visualization suggested previously in the sense that the activity of philosophy is the critical work that shrinks, condenses, or deflates the circular space that is history’s self-reproduction into the condensation of a pure singular point or pivot that represents the empty void across which our relational social fabric is so precariously hung. Of course, there is no question of this being a closed circle in the sense of a dogmatic totality; it is to be understood in the purely negative sense of a critical chipping-away at all of the non-essential, arbitrary protrusions of a statue in progress. Because the whole statue is non-essential in the sense that existence precedes essence, philosophy must always tend toward that state in which the statue is finally destroyed, insofar as even the satisfaction of its beauty is complicit with the distant and veiled relations between things that are the condition for refined aesthetic perception.

To pursue the topological metaphor even further, we could say, in the terms of set-theoretic

topology, that beauty and oppression at any given historical threshold are in the same “neighborhood:” that is, beauty is linked in an homogenous space to oppression insofar as the enjoyment of beauty always spends resources, economic and symbolic, the absence of which accounts for how the oppressed are oppressed and not happy artists. Simply put, the curse of critique is that it always resides within the same circle as that which it critiques, and only by highly questionable subterfuges can it hope to exploit the disequilibria, the chance parallaxes of dialectical social reproduction. Insofar as this repression is made possible by a certain distribution of resources that, at the same time, permits oppression and coincides with systematic differences in the ability to genuinely and happily forget ugliness, beauty is only the upshot of oppression.

This is why so much has been made of Socrates’ ugliness: because true philosophy cannot afford the corrupt privilege of beauty. Ethics, afterwards, is condemned to the task of constructing beauty dialectically out of ugliness, such as in Alcibiades well-known comments about his love for the lover of wisdom. This is to point out that sexual desire, what Lacan called the pulsation of the unconscious and represented in the topology of the partial drive, is simply the biological component of historical circularity. The meaning of the philosopher as *atopos*, as having no place in the temporal spatiality of historical time, is the same as the meaning of Socrates’ sexual unattractiveness, not to mention his final legal-politic defeat: true philosophy, and *ipso facto* a philosophically rigorous ethics, must establish all of the right ways to reclaim the wrong.

We are certainly not speaking, however, of a kind of shotgun situationism in which simple ludicrousness is sufficient. Although an adequate account and fair criticism of the myriad instantiations of the political theory of the “everyday” or of the micropolitics of transgressive practices is not possible here, an important point is that a genuinely ethical radicalism would not have any of the romantic joy some contemporary radicals associate with the notion of revolutionary politics.

In fact, a proof of the effectivity of any particular act of ethical radicalism understood in this way is that it must coincide with an emotional experience by the actor and his spectator(s) that *something has gone wrong*—a sense, depending on the location of each individual, of confusion, a sense that the correlates of our being in the world have just been disturbed, that the practico-inert field has been discernibly disrupted by a reshuffling of things caused by an action incongruent with its subtle interdictions; uneasiness or shame should be aroused if one is truly riding over a bump in the circular course that is the social experience of habitus. The feeling of sand on the train tracks of social reproduction, which at the very least slows down the car and gives all of the riders a chance to pause and reflect on their situation, like the bus-riders in the *Critique*. Or better, the circular loop of structured, structuring structures is somehow sliced and, however so slightly, realigned to look more like the loop of a roller coaster, returning almost into itself but actually exiting the circle onto a new path immediately next to it.

In fact, what the diversity of these metaphors reveals is that although the social experience of an individual is in fact a roughly circular path, its attributes (length, width, height, and its very placement relative to others) are variable and dependent on the rider of the path. That is, the real power of Sartre's conception of the fused group, for instance, is not to simply reveal that serially separated individuals can be united by external threats common to them all, but that it invites empirical investigation into the conditions that distinguish a genuine fusing from a failed attempt at mobilization.

Thus the theoretical and empirical payoff of situating the logic of symbolic capital in relation to Sartre's *Critique* is that the often-cited points of objection to each project are taken up or filled-in in such a way as to permit a new and compelling "solution" to the problems sketched above. My argument has shown that the logic of symbolic capital provides an empirical edge necessary to make the *Critique* more than an imaginary novel, and the *Critique* provides the theoretically heroic (imaginative or not) spirit of rebellion necessary to mobilize the logic of symbolic capital into a more politically charged playbook of dialectically strategic praxis.

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1. It should be mentioned that although I consider several works of Bourdieu, in considering Sartre I deal primarily with the *Critique of Dialectical Reason*. One reason for this is that there is perhaps much greater variation in Sartre's thought over time than in Bourdieu's,



thus making it preferable to focus the “late” Sartre by restricting attention to what most would agree is the most important work of that period. ↩

2. Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, 1, 42. ↩
3. Bourdieu, *Flaubert's Point of View*, 540. It is hard to resist the impression that Bourdieu's criticism is questionable at best, and something of a caricature at worst. It is far from clear that Sartre is so simply guilty of such a reductive social philosophy, and in fact the *Critique of Dialectical Reason* may very well be read as an attempt to give a more serious treatment to the intelligibility of the very field-specific questions Bourdieu raises. Thus, when one reads in Bourdieu's article on Flaubert that Sartre ignores important broader questions regarding the literary and political fields by focusing too narrowly on Flaubert's family situation, one is surprised to find passages such as the following in the *Critique*: “Throughout all these transformations, our proprietor's income and the value of his possessions will change (or at least they may change) from one year to another and they will change, as it were, *in his hands*, even if, like Gustave Flaubert, his is a bachelor and an artist and remains entirely passive. In other words, this interior-being as possessed materiality turns to be conditioned by the whole of exteriority. His real person as an isolated molecule is separated from all the others by an absolute vacuum and his personality-matter, as the object that he is, is subjected to the shifting laws of exteriority, as a perverse and demoniac interiority. Lastly, throughout the ups and downs, the crises and the good years, everything drives him back into need, through the fear of privation (in negative moments), or into expansion of his property as a real intensification of his powers...As soon as an objective ensemble is posited in a given society as the definition of an individual in his *personal* particularity and when as such it requires this individual to act on the entire practical and social field, and to preserve it (as an organism preserves itself) and develop it at the expense of the rest (as an organism feeds itself by drawing on its exterior milieu), the individual possesses an interest (199).” We find here an almost term for term equivalence between this description of individual interest-formation and Bourdieu's own descriptions of how individuals are habituated to structural determinations. ↩
4. Bourdieu, *Flaubert's Point of View*, 545. ↩
5. Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, 178–179. ↩
6. Sartre, *Critique*, 332. ↩
7. It is not altogether coincidental that one of the key concepts that underwrite this form of statistical analysis, which comes out of geometric data modeling, is the concept of *inertia*. Inertia in that context is a property that describes the contribution to total variance given by the value of a particular variable. In other words, inertia represents statistical distance from the norm. In a sense this is the opposite of the practico-inert insofar as the latter itself represents the heavy mass that is the statistical norm. However, this terminological affinity

is rightfully provocative of further consideration. This is because from the point of view of any action not yet taken, the inertia or contribution to variance of that particular action is not itself the totality of social norms as a balanced set but what will contribute to the balance of norm only by virtue of its statistical distance from a roughly opposed class of behaviors that are equally, but in an opposite direction, different than the action in question. This is because if we interpret any new, emergent praxis as possessing and contributing some quantity of its own inertia—which is a safe reading of both Bourdieu and Sartre—then Bourdieu’s techniques might offer an exciting positivist angle on strategies of dialectically theorized praxis. In brief, if it is possible to theorize relative magnitudes of inertia for different classes of interventions in the material or symbolic orders, then it is possible to imagine a positivist science of transversals, a specification of the conditions under which particular acts, with variable inertia, produce variable effects on the restructuration of the field and therefore on future behaviors. ↩

8. Sartre, *Critique*, 37. ↩
9. Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, 192. ↩
10. *Ibid.* ↩
11. Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, 198–209. ↩
12. Sartre, *Critique*, 571. ↩
13. Sartre, *Notebooks for an Ethics*, 186. ↩
14. Sartre, *Notebooks for an Ethics*, 8. ↩
15. Bourdieu, *Practical Reason*, 144. ↩
16. Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, 198. ↩