

Mustafa Emirbayer

**Michael Burawoy and Karl von Holdt, "Conversations with Bourdieu: The Johannesburg Moment". Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2012, 236 pp.**

(doi: 10.2383/79485)

Sociologica (ISSN 1971-8853)

Fascicolo 3, settembre-dicembre 2014

**Ente di afferenza:**

()

Copyright © by Società editrice il Mulino, Bologna. Tutti i diritti sono riservati.  
Per altre informazioni si veda <https://www.rivisteweb.it>

**Licenza d'uso**

Questo articolo è reso disponibile con licenza CC BY NC ND. Per altre informazioni si veda <https://www.rivisteweb.it/>

## Book Review “Focus On Pierre Bourdieu”

### Bourdieu, Marxism, and Northern Theory

**Michael Burawoy and Karl von Holdt, *Conversations with Bourdieu: The Johannesburg Moment*. Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2012, 236 pp.**

doi: 10.2383/79485

Throughout his career, Michael Burawoy has been concerned to engage in critical dialogue with leading scholars and schools of thought in sociology. Over the years, he has taken on an unusually wide array of targets: status attainment research; grounded theory; ethnomethodology; even the comparative historical sociology of Theda Skocpol. Burawoy's critiques of these alternative approaches never have failed to generate extensive discussion and debate.

Now, in this unique, one-of-a-kind work, Burawoy takes on his most formidable object yet: the sociology of Pierre Bourdieu. He develops his arguments about Bourdieu over the course of several “conversations” or compare-and-contrast exercises in which he confronts Bourdieu with major figures of his own or earlier times: Karl Marx, Antonio Gramsci, Frantz Fanon, Paulo Freire, Simone de Beauvoir, and C. Wright Mills. (Also included near the end is a “conversation” with Burawoy himself). Burawoy claims that Bourdieu consistently avoided all such dialogic encounters in his own work, preferring instead an “absent combat with [an] absent enemy” – a “symbolic violence of [...] erasure” – with opponents to be “slain off-stage with no more than a fleeting appearance in front of the readership” [p. 10]. Bourdieu was concerned to maximize his own originality at the expense of his competitors; indeed, he was full of “contempt” toward them (the word “contempt” appears here frequently). In Burawoy's view – and this is one of his major themes – we need an alternative model of science, one “more open and gentle” and centered on dialogue, not combat or the practice of “disrecognizing others.”

In the dialogues he constructs between Bourdieu and various interlocutors, Burawoy presents, time and again, truly amazing parallels and convergences, sometimes of a biographical nature, other times more intellectual. In fact, one of the highlights of this work is the sheer ingenuity with which these similarities are drawn out.<sup>1</sup> We learn, for instance, about the several “uncanny parallels [that] join Marx's and Engels's critique of the ‘German Ideology’ and Bourdieu's critique of ‘scholastic reason’ in *Pascalian Meditations*” [p. 32]. We learn about the deep convergences between Marx's concept of mode of production and Bourdieu's concept of field, not to mention also the “uncanny convergence” in how they conceive of symbolic domination. Or, to take one of the later “conversations,” we learn about the “astonishing parallels” between Bourdieu and Fanon: both began their personal journeys in the periphery before moving to the center; both suffered bitter experiences of marginalization; both arrived in Algeria during the mid-

<sup>1</sup> Full disclosure: I have tried my own hand at this sort of exercise, having once authored an imaginary conversation between Bourdieu and Charles Tilly. So my admiration partly is that of a sometime practitioner of the very craft so impressively on display in this work.

1950s, when Algeria was consumed with anticolonial struggle; both developed amazingly convergent analyses of colonial domination; and both ended up with similarly pessimistic accounts of the workings of symbolic violence back in France, together with contempt for those among the marginalized who would seek admission to the French elite: “It is as if their own histories of exclusion, seared into their psyches, [led] the one (Bourdieu) to be a self-hating petit bourgeois and the other (Fanon) a self-hating black” [p. 90]. One could provide endless other examples of “striking parallels” from other chapters of the work. What also is interesting, however, are the important differences that Burawoy underscores, not always to Bourdieu’s benefit. So, to continue with the Fanon dialogue, we learn that whereas “Fanon stresses the *psychoanalysis* of internalized oppression in the context of the French racial order, Bourdieu undertakes the *socio-analysis* of outward distinction, supported by the undeveloped psychology of habitus” [p. 76]. We learn also about “their inverse trajectory: Fanon moves from symbolic violence to social revolution, whereas Bourdieu moves in the opposite direction, from social revolution to symbolic violence” [*ibidem*]. Or, in the chapter on Beauvoir, we learn that *Masculine Domination* is but a “pale imitation” of, a “superficial and diminutive gloss” on, *The Second Sex* – “Beauvoir’s analysis is considerably more profound than Bourdieu’s” – are dismayed to learn, too, of Bourdieu’s “masculinist” attempts at “silencing” his great predecessor, whom he hardly ever deigns to mention. And so it goes throughout the work. One almost cannot believe the range and variety of comparisons Burawoy is able to develop – or the number of critical insights he is able to derive from them, critical insights into both Bourdieu and (sometimes) the authors with whom he is paired.

Nearly all the authors chosen for this series of “conversations” belong to the Marxian tradition.<sup>2</sup> (Mills is the least comfortable fit, as Burawoy acknowledges). Bourdieu was deeply influenced by Marx, of course, but he also pointed in a different direction in many aspects of his thought. By setting up these imaginary engagements, Burawoy aims critically to assess Bourdieu’s sociology. What we learn is that Bourdieu overplays the role of symbolic domination and has an inadequate understanding of historical change; that he fails to see how workers can come to genuinely critical insights into the nature and conditions of their own domination; and that he makes too much of the notion that intellectuals can pursue a *Realpolitik* of Reason apart from, and epistemologically mistrustful of, lay common sense, as if the theorist somehow were “above the people being theorized.” Do we also learn through these dialogues about Marxism’s own weaknesses? To be sure, we are given scattered indications: it needs better developed theories of intellectuals, of the symbolic realm, and of the social psychology of domination. But these critiques never do come together, unlike the critiques of Bourdieu, which are

<sup>2</sup> One other social theorist not officially set up as an interlocutor for Bourdieu but mentioned briefly at the outset, and then again at several points across the text, is Talcott Parsons. Burawoy’s juxtaposition of them, while sketchily developed, perhaps is the most telling in the entire work. For Parsons’s theory of society, with its “sealing of the social order,” anticipates (in Burawoy’s view) Bourdieu’s own functionalism, while his socialization theory, with a cultural dope as its product, also finds echoes (according to Burawoy) in the Bourdieuan theory of habitus formation, with its proposition that, through socialization, individuals learn actively if unwittingly to perpetuate their own domination, thereby becoming the victims of symbolic violence. Parsons is, in these ways at least, reborn as Bourdieu.

carefully summarized at the start and finish of the work. Indeed, Burawoy seems more concerned with Bourdieu's shortcomings than with Marxism's; more often than not, he vindicates Marxism to the detriment of Bourdieu. The idea that reconstructing Marxism is a crucial challenge for our times does seem a deep and abiding motivation for the work. As Burawoy notes, "The growth of Marxism has always relied on an engagement with sociology as its alter ego, and in our era the preeminent representative of sociology is Pierre Bourdieu, and so he provides the impetus for the reconstruction of Marxism for the Twenty-First century" [p. 24]. But just what this reconstruction might look like only is hinted at in an episodic, unsystematic fashion.

A final core theme of the book, beyond that of the instructiveness of dialogic encounters between Bourdieu and various (Marxian) interlocutors, is the need for dialogue between the global South and the global North. Subtitled *The Johannesburg Moment*, the book is built on a series of lectures Burawoy gave during a semester in South Africa, and each of his constructed dialogues is followed by a brief (roughly five-page) response by South African sociologist Karl von Holdt. These contributions have the aim of "returning Bourdieu to where he began his sociological life – Africa", they use Bourdieu "to construct a dialogue about the South Africa of yesterday, today, and tomorrow" [p. xi], and they test the limits of applicability of Bourdieu's ideas to that society's complexities and challenges. Indeed, the responses become a way of putting to the test not only Bourdieu's insights but also those of Northern theory more generally (including Marxism); von Holdt stresses repeatedly the analytic difficulties these theoretical frameworks face in making sense of societies such as his. Significantly, however, the responses also serve as an invitation to deepening, perhaps reconstructing, these theories rather than to spurning or rejecting them wholesale. Von Holdt is broadly sympathetic to Marxism, but he also is sympathetic to many aspects of Bourdieu's sociology. Indeed, his ambition to work with, rather than against, Bourdieu occasionally puts him at odds with Burawoy himself. Hence another remarkable feature of the work: *it is itself a dialogue*, in addition to all the dialogues it contains; specifically, it is a running dialogue between its two coauthors.

The same analytic problems seem to be underscored in von Holdt's contributions as in Burawoy's, despite von Holdt's greater empirical specificity and his more direct focus on the difficulties facing contemporary South Africa. How far are we to go in methodically distrusting the critical capacities of ordinary people? How are we to conceive of the relation between intellectuals and workers; between social science and everyday insight; between theory and practice? And what are we to think of the relation between symbolic violence and more physical forms of violence? As it turns out, what can be "sent back to the metropolis" is a theoretical perspective that stresses the dynamic interplay between different modalities of violence rather than the exclusive sway of one or the other form; a perspective that acknowledges and seeks to further the "subversive potentiality of 'legitimate culture'" even as it recognizes that the dominant culture also can be far from liberating or empowering; and a perspective that affirms the critical ideas and insights that ordinary people already have, even as it also affirms the "vigorous defense of reason, scholarship, and the logic of theory" – all these being reconstructions, rather than repudiations, of Bourdieu's views.

As mentioned at the outset, this is an utterly unique and remarkable work. It also is provocative and illuminating from the first page to the last. To some readers, the

Bourdieu presented here will be something of a stock figure, a synthesis of nearly every mischaracterization ever made of him as a social thinker (reproduction-oriented; elitist; arrogant; undemocratic; ahistorical; masculinist; functionalist; unagentic). By now there is a considerable scholarly literature seeking to refute this portrayal and to present a more nuanced picture. But Burawoy seemingly will have none of that; he is uninterested and sticks to the conventional image. The tacking-on of a Southern theorist as secondary commentator also might make some readers uncomfortable. Indeed, he is given a subordinate role not only from “conversation” to “conversation” but also in the sense that Burawoy is granted the last word; in the “Epilogue,” he speaks not only for himself but also for von Holdt, summarizing his arguments and evaluating them in positive tones (“a brilliant move” [p. 215]). But these possibly problematic features of the work notwithstanding, the dialogues presented here, including between the two coauthors, are unfailingly stimulating, and like Burawoy’s dialogues in the past with alternative sociologies in his intellectual midst, they promise to generate not only controversy but light. *Conversations with Bourdieu* will raise the level of the debate on Bourdieu, Marxism, and Northern theory. All serious students of late-twentieth-century social thought will benefit from reading it – and from engaging in their own critical dialogues with its many interesting arguments.

Mustafa Emirbayer  
University of Wisconsin-Madison