

Why International Relations Theory Needs Bourdieu

Written by Rebecca Adler-Nissen

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REBECCA ADLER-NISSEN, OCT 23 2012

We already have Althusser, Foucault and Derrida. Does International Relations really need Pierre Bourdieu? The short answer is yes. The slightly longer answer is that Bourdieu's sociology provides us with an opportunity to rethink international politics in ways not offered by these other thinkers. Bourdieu helps us rediscover the everyday practices, symbolic structures and arenas of conflict that bring many other actors into perspective, rather than just focusing on nation states that produce (what we call) international politics. An engagement with Bourdieu redirects our discipline from being influenced by overly abstracted and simplified reifications of world politics, which is currently the case in both positivist and post-positivist perspectives. Bourdieu allows us to explore how regular people at various levels create international relations in their daily activities. In short, Bourdieu helps us to take the discursive, visual and embodied practices in world politics more seriously.

Not Just a Public Intellectual

When Bourdieu died of cancer in a Paris hospital in 2002, he had made profound impact in the social sciences. The son of a village postman, Bourdieu had set new agendas not only in research on social class and poverty, but also in studies of media, language, literature, education, science, gender and political communication. One area in which Bourdieu was almost ignored, however, was International Relations. This is perhaps not surprising. His own engagement with international politics seemed to be limited to his activities as a public intellectual. In his later years, Bourdieu championed the anti-globalization movement and other anti-establishment causes in France and beyond (Swartz 2004). However, Bourdieu was first and foremost a remarkable social theorist and empirical researcher. His productive career resulted in more than 25 books and hundreds of articles. It is in this capacity more than as an engaged citizen (or what his critics would call an outdated "anti-mondialiste"), that he will be most valuable to the further development of IR as a discipline.

An Alternative Vocabulary

By using key terms from Bourdieu's sociology such as field, habitus, symbolic power, capital, doxa and reflexivity, it is possible to map political units as spaces of practical knowledge on which diverse and often 'unconventional' agencies position themselves and therefore shape international politics. Thus, the following crucial questions can be answered in original ways with sensitivity to the everyday practices in world politics:

- how inclusion/exclusion lines are constituted;
- how social groups and institutions in world politics enact their practices of assimilation or distinction;
- which power mechanisms are at the disposition of the different actors; and
- how to observe the constitution, usage and change of political ideas through economic, cultural and social practices.

Rethinking State Sovereignty

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For example, Bourdieu gives us imaginative ways of rethinking the development and nature of IR's core concept – the state. Bourdieu's reflection on the state's 'meta-capital', understood as a definitional power – capable of exercising control over other types of power such as educational status or military professionalism – provides us with a concrete way to analyse the interplay between the symbolic and material resources that contribute to state sovereignty (Adler-Nissen 2011). Contrary to the formalistic views on the state still dominant in IR theory, where sovereignty is an either/or concept with a series of predefined discursive or material attributes, Bourdieu does not view the state as static. On the contrary, Bourdieu focuses on the historical processes and slow-changing cultural systems that make up for instance post-colonial Algeria. At the same time, Bourdieu helps us to understand how non-state actors such as transnational movements and actors challenge sovereignty by questioning the state's regalian functions.

The Specificity of “the international”

Although one of Bourdieu's most important works *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (1977) is an ethnographic exploration of Kabyle society, including reflections on French colonialism in Algeria, he never forged his concepts for the empirical objects that are usually studied in IR. One central question is whether there *is* a specificity to the international? And if so what makes the international special? On the one hand, a Bourdieusian analysis enables us to see that the international order is produced in much the same ways as the domestic order, i.e. as a densely structured social space inhabited by discursive, bodily and material relations. On the other hand, Bourdieu also provides us with tools to understand how the powerful distinction between “inside” and “outside” is upheld everyday by everything from border guards to national statisticians and IR scholars. If we are to coherently “scale up” Bourdieu to the international realm, we need to question and work our way through these and other specificities.

Whatever the specificity of the international might consist of, a Bourdieusian reading of “the international” turns mainstream IR theory upside down. When neorealists claim that the international system is anarchical, Bourdieu would insist that it is hierarchical. When the English School suggests that “pariah states and failed states” can be seen as being somehow outside international society relegated to a more abstract international system “with less dense interaction” (Dunne 2010: 148), a Bourdieu-inspired approach argues that processes of exclusion are intrinsic to international society.

From Critical Theory to the Practice Turn

In the 1980s, Bourdieu became a reference in a meta-theoretical debate between positivist theories and post-positivist IR theories (what some call the 4th debate). Bourdieu helped question the choices of research questions that were accepted as legitimate within IR (Bigo and Walker 2007: 728). Bourdieu helped IR scholars demonstrate that “objective” structures such as the liberal market economy or the Cold War's bipolar system were in fact historical contingent effects of particular practices that excluded other ways of organising the world. However, when making these arguments, most IR scholars did not make full use of Bourdieu's theoretical arsenal. His critical stance was an inspiration, but his analytical tools were not fully employed.

In recent years, however, this has changed as Bourdieu has played an important role in the so-called “practice turn” in IR theory (Neumann, 2002, Adler and Pouliot 2011; Pouliot 2007). Practice theory focuses on the everyday, highlighting embodied capacities such as know-how, skills and tacit understandings, i.e. shared social practices. Contrary to the early pioneers, driven by a desire to demonstrate the problems of theory-construction within the IR field, practice scholars use Bourdieu as a thinker who offers useful analytical framework for studying concrete practices such as multilateral diplomacy, global banking or migration.

Towards a Reflexive Sociology of World Politics

What is picked up by the practice turn is not so much Bourdieu's insights on the production of knowledge as his understanding of the mutually constituted relationship between social structure and social action. However, Bourdieu would have shared Hedley Bull's criticism of ‘the scientific approach to international relations’. Bull warned against their ‘uncritical attitude toward their own assumptions, and especially toward the moral and political attitudes that

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have a central but unacknowledged position in much of what they say' (Bull 1966: 375). Bourdieu would have agreed with Bull that IR scholars lack 'reflexivity'. Knowledge – including academic knowledge – is inherently political. The social scientist, according to Bourdieu, must engage in a 'sociology of sociology'. Reflexivity is, therefore, a kind of additional stage in the scientific epistemology.

Indeed, one of Bourdieu's trademarks was his insistence not only on critical self-investigation of the author's own position, but also of a continuous critique of the discipline of academic discipline as such. Bourdieu writes: 'The intellectual world, which believes itself so profoundly liberated from conformity and convention, has always seemed to me as inhabited by conformities, that acted upon me as repulsive forces' (Bourdieu 2004, quoted in Reed-Danahay 2004: 1). Bourdieu helps IR scholars move towards a theoretically informed empirical sociology. Moreover, Bourdieu's reflexivity provides IR scholars with a way of critically examining the positions from which they themselves and their colleagues speak.

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