Review


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*Conversations with Bourdieu* is based on a lecture series given by the American Marxist sociologist, Michael Burawoy, during his stint as visiting professor at the University of Witwatersrand in 2010. It is a critical examination of the works of Pierre Bourdieu, arguably the most influential sociologists of our time. Ten years after his death, Bourdieu continues to captivate, provoke, and to generate further debate and discussion.

As the title reveals, the book’s structure is that of a conversation, an intellectual *tête-à-tête*. On the one hand, it includes a series of imaginary conversations between Bourdieu and other central social theorists of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, such as Karl Marx, Antonio Gramsci, Franz Fanon, Paolo Freire, Simone de Beauvoir and C Wright Mills. The book provides a platform on which the three pillars of Bourdieu’s work – symbolic domination, social reflexivity and public engagement – are pitted against the theory of renowned Marxist scholars (although Burawoy acknowledges Wright Mills’ ambiguous relationship with Marxism). In addition, the book offers a dialogue between social theory of the global North and that of the global South. Mediated by the South African sociologist, Karl von Holdt, it attempts to locate the conceptual discussions introduced by Burawoy in the contemporary South African context. This is an ambitious undertaking which Burawoy and Von Holdt execute admirably.

While much of Bourdieu’s ideas originate from his studies of the Kabyle kinship society in Algeria, his theoretical concepts have mostly been
applied to the European context and the French in particular. As a result, many have regarded Bourdieu’s conceptual toolkit inappropriate for ‘non-Western’ societies. Bourdieu was primarily concerned with symbolic domination and subordination, and the ways in which these were ‘inscribed in bodies, languages and psyches’ (25). The authors admit that the symbolic mechanisms of order may appear far ‘removed from the South African situation, where physical violence seemed far more salient’ (x). The history of South Africa is one of overt and explicit violence: from the era of colonialism, through apartheid and into the present. Acknowledging the contextual differences between France and South Africa, Von Holdt sees the need to pose a critical question in the opening sections of this book: ‘So why read Bourdieu in South Africa?’ (25).

This is essentially the question upon which the book is founded. In bringing Bourdieu ‘back to Africa’, Burawoy and Von Holdt show the extent to which his ideas can explain the logic of the South African society (x). While Von Holdt notes that Bourdieu’s concepts of field, habitus, cultural capital and symbolic domination can help us understand the mechanisms of the societal order (26), he is simultaneously aware of the potential dangers of universalising Bourdieu’s ideas. In fact, he concedes that ‘it may be that Bourdieu’s concepts are rendered useless in our social reality, that they flutter about like moths caught in strong sunlight, out of their element, pointing to the need for other concepts’ (27). Throughout the book’s eight chapters, the authors steer convincingly between these two positions.

Arguably one of the most enticing chapters of the book is Burawoy’s own personal engagement with Bourdieu. In ‘Manufacturing dissent’, the book’s final chapter, Burawoy compares his own work to that of Bourdieu. Burawoy admits that there are striking parallels between their works, particularly with regards to his Gramscian account of the ‘twofold truth of labour’ in the seminal text, *Manufacturing Consent* (1979): ‘How had Bourdieu arrived at a seemingly identical formulation to my own? How could I be using the language of hegemony and consent to describe what, indeed, looked more like symbolic domination and misrecognition?’ (177). This acknowledgement, Burawoy concedes, opened up for a fundamental reassessment of his own theoretical narrative: ‘On the one hand, it compelled a critique of Gramsci for overlooking *mystification* that characterises advanced capitalism. On the other hand, it led to a critique of Bourdieu of projecting *misrecognition* as a universal – the result of the incorporated and embodied habitus – rather than seeing it as mystification, ie something socially produced and historically
contingent’ (177). It is exactly this distinction between mystification and misrecognition that lies at the heart of Burawoy’s disagreement with Bourdieu. *Conversations with Bourdieu* has generated considerable debate in and outside of South Africa. While its reception has been largely positive, the book has been criticised for neglecting South African and African scholarship in its analysis. ‘There is not one sentence attributed to a South African or African theorist in any of the theoretical conversations orchestrated by Burawoy between Bourdieu and others’ (Sitas 2012:273). Furthermore, Sitas stress that in contrast to what the authors imply, Bourdieu is far from absent in South African literature: ‘Even though his influence was marginal in the 1970s-1990s, there were serious debates about it. His appreciation only gained in volume and presence since the 2000s’ (2012:273). Whether this is a justified critique ultimately depends on the book’s *raison d’être*. Along similar lines, one could potentially argue that the alluring conversational mode of this book is also its Achilles’ heel. Over a mere 218 pages, Bourdieu’s work is put up against multiple social theories. As a result, the analysis occasionally falls short of depth and rigour. In these instances, the book fails to encompass the complexities of the debates drawn up, particularly with regards to the intricate nature of Bourdieu’s oeuvre, as well as that of his ‘opponents’.

With regards to the two critiques, however, it is likely that the authors neither intended to provide a complete assessment of Bourdieu’s opus, nor to give a comprehensive outline of his African affiliates. Rather, the book appears to be an attempt to place Bourdieu in the ring together with other prominent scholars, repackage him and present his ideas to a new audience. In this regard, the idea of comparing Bourdieu to other social theorists should be commended, especially since Bourdieu himself ‘took a dismissive stance toward his competitors and forerunners, largely silencing the giants upon whose shoulders he was perched’ (13).

Overall, Burawoy and Von Holdt succeed in accomplishing the book’s main objective, namely to turn Bourdieu *against* Bourdieu, to test him against his own theory and practice, as well as that of others. In doing so, the book has opened up new venues for debate, particularly with regards to how we understand our social world and the usefulness of Western canonical works in this process. For this achievement alone, the book should be regarded as a serious literary contribution to the debate on contemporary social theory.
References