

REVIEW ESSAYS

CAN THERE BE A BOURDIEUSIAN THEORY OF CRISIS? ON HISTORICAL CHANGE AND SOCIAL THEORY¹

BOURDIEU AND HISTORICAL ANALYSIS. Edited by Philip S. Gorski. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012. Pp. 244.

ABSTRACT

Philip Gorski's edited book engages the question of how Bourdieu's concepts can aid historical analysis, and in particular, account for change as well as reproduction. From a fascinating set of papers, this review essay takes special notice of two that theorize crisis. One, by Ivan Ermakoff, engages the question of whether disruption creates the opportunity for more conscious calculation on the part of actors; a second, by Gisele Sapiro, considers how a crisis reverberates through a specific field. This leads to further reflection on Bourdieu's work on power and the state, as well as a call for crisis hermeneutics in social theory.

Keywords: Ivan Ermakoff, Gisele Sapiro, field, habitus, rational action theory, crisis, hermeneutics, social theory, comparative-historical sociology, history and theory

I

It is to the great credit of Philip Gorski and the contributors to this volume that this text falsifies the current opinion in academia that edited books are of but minor importance. The text will be an essential reference, for many years to come, for three conversations: on Bourdieu; on the relationship between theory and history in the human sciences; and on post-cultural turn comparative sociology. Those interested in all three should probably treat it with Talmudic neuroticism.

Gorski has assembled a quite compelling set of essays, and attached to them his own definitive interpretation of the implications of Bourdieu's work for historical sociology. In so doing, he and the contributors have raised several issues that, although I will not address them here, strike me as essential: (1) what is the relationship between Bourdieu and Latour, and in particular how can the two be used together in empirical analysis? (for one answer, see Gil Eyal's chapter, "The Spaces between Fields"); (2) how do we think about habitus and its relationship to concepts such as motivation and the unconscious (for one answer, see George Steinmetz's chapter, "Toward Socioanalysis: The 'Traumatic Kernel'")

1. I would like to thank Claire Decoteau and Monika Krause for comments on an earlier draft of this essay, and Jennifer Bair and Adam Slez for discussing the ideas contained herein. All errors are my own.

of Psychoanalysis and Neo-Bourdiesian Theory”); and, perhaps most fittingly, are we in a new era of Bourdieusian analysis in American sociology wherein, despite the repeated insistence that field, capital, and habitus go together, we have, *de facto*, shifted from an emphasis on capital to an emphasis on field and its accompanying term, *illusio*? (see the whole volume, but also who is missing from it).

In this short essay, I wish to take up one small part of the larger intellectual concern that drives the volume: the relationship between Bourdieu’s master concepts and the vagaries and varieties of social change as comprehended by history. A recent collection of essays by William Sewell, Jr. was subtitled “social theory and social transformation,” and in essence Gorksi’s book asks whether Sewell’s questions can be answered with Bourdieu’s theory. One part of this concern is the issue of *crisis*: the problem of whether Bourdieu’s key working concepts can help us understand that rather ill-defined object of investigation that somehow includes political revolutions, “unsettled times,” and much else besides. Two essays in the book frame this question almost too perfectly.

II

First is Ivan Ermakoff’s “Rational Choice May Take Over,” which, taking its title from a famous comment by Bourdieu, works on the idea that in “times of crisis” the deliberative, calculating actor of rational action theory—so often found, by Bourdieu, to be an error in sociological judgment—may step onto the historical stage. Or, to be more precise, Ermakoff explores, via Bourdieu, the possibility that, in studying times of disruption and crisis, the rational actor model may gain some traction in empirical reality, and thus become an important, if not exclusive, part of the analyst’s conceptual apparatus. Ermakoff’s article bravely pulls into its orbit the much-debated concept of reflexivity. His overall argument is succinctly stated: “Crisis situations are amenable to the tools of rational choice because they elicit a heightened level of consciousness. Routine patterns and conjunctures are propitious to the theory of practice since they make reflexivity superfluous” (91).

Ultimately, for Ermakoff, this is an issue of affordance. You can navigate the world without too much deliberation when there is not a crisis, because the unconscious strategy provided by habitus (primary or secondary) can do the work for you. But, argues Ermakoff, “in times of rupture, this luxury becomes problematic” (93). In these moments, not only does the habitus not work, but in realizing that their habitus is not working, actors come to deliberate and start to calculate. What they do is informed by a “sense of disjuncture.”

Ermakoff connects this to a second Bourdieusian idea, namely that the “double consciousness” of actors caught between two different symbolic universes is not only the basis of enhanced insight, but becomes particularly manifest in periods of crisis, when these actors, operating with an expanded repertoire of symbols, can seize the day. He also allows for the possibility that crisis disrupts not only the model of ontological complicity between habitus and field, but also the rational actor model itself, insofar as crisis situations themselves create so much

uncertainty about the future that calculation becomes impossible (97). These three different ideas are woven throughout the essay and are well worth the price of admission.

The overall argument, is, however, closely tied to the first idea. It is that, in the category of crisis, we have a complex point of theoretical dialogue concerning the historical and social conditions under which one theoretical framework or another is the best way to understand what happens in the world. And those who know Ermakoff's own work²—on the Reichstag in 1933 and the formation of Vichy France in 1940—will quickly recognize where this is going: toward an analysis of times of crisis as those in which the *intersubjective coordination of action* must take place via signaling, and only then can the social machinery so well-modeled by game theory do its work. Ermakoff is onto an interesting idea, which I will put a bit too crudely here: if habitus–field relations are disrupted (or more generally, action–structure relations), then something has to “fill in” the taken-for-granted background of action before strategic action can emerge. Thus “rational choice may take over” but only when, via interaction, the suddenly disabled, field-specific *illusio* is replaced with some other basis of vision and division. And thus the field–habitus relation runs aground on the rocky shoals of crisis and disruption.

III

But rational choice may not take over. A direct counterpoint to Ermakoff's article is to be found in Gisele Sapiro's “Structural History and Crisis Analysis: The Literary Field in France during the Second World War,” which, though drawing from many of the same Bourdieusian sources, goes in a quite different direction. Here the focus is less on habitus, and the concerns are far from those of rational action theory (at least at the explicit level). Rather, what Sapiro takes from Bourdieu is the idea of an “analytic model of political crises that tries to overcome the alternative between structural history and the history of events” (266). Drawing from *Homo Academicus*,³ she arrives at the following way of posing the question: if fields have their own histories, due precisely to their differentiation from one another, how do we theorize the interrelationship of fields as *itself* an object of historical analysis? One way to do this analysis is to identify a crisis or eventful break as a moment when previously differentiated fields are “harmonized” with one another:

The relative autonomy of fields, which translates exterior constraints according to their own logic and own temporality, means that structural history deals with several independent causal series. The historical event is precisely the product of the interaction of these independent causal series, of the synchronization of different fields' temporality and the harmonization of their agenda . . . during the crisis. (266)

2. Ivan Ermakoff, *Ruling Oneself Out: A Theory of Collective Abdication* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008).

3. Pierre Bourdieu, *Homo Academicus*, transl. Peter Collier (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988).

Her empirical example is the “politicization” of the French literary field during the occupation, and, in particular, the complex way in which the *subordination* of the literary field to the political field allowed previously marginal actors to become prominent ones, created some new actors, and generally produced a complex series of “crisis dynamics” that had as their counterpoint the *reaction to this politicization* after the liberation.

To get our stories straight here, let me first lay out what, for Sapiro, is equivalent to the “external factors” so ambivalently treated by Bourdieu in his analysis of May ’68 in *Homo Academicus*. For Sapiro, the military defeat leads to a political and economic crisis, which leads to a crisis in “national identity and the legitimacy of the government” (267). This ordering meant that all fields were then subordinated to the political: “Within occupied France the degree of politicization and heteronomy was extreme, featuring economic collaboration with Nazi Germany, politicization of the judicial space. . . . Nevertheless, the degree of subordination to the political field varied among the different fields” (267).

However, *even in the case of the crisis of Nazi-occupied France*, there is a way in which the specific logic of the literary field structured the manifestation of the crisis. Extensive analysis shows that position in the field prior to occupation predicts well the interpretation of the defeat, and the new alliances that emerged with the transformation and politicization of the field can be retrodicted. Marginal figures came to the fore, but in a specific way: the Communists were given greater value by those alienated from the new regime than they would have been during “normal times,” and, of course, on the right, certain previously disdained “hacks” were given access to prestige and power within the field because of the material advantages granted by the regime. Furthermore, the generational opposition between aesthetes and the avant garde lost importance as both allied together in times of trouble. There is, of course, a material dimension to all this, especially at the level of the control of printing presses (underground or not).

IV

Both articles are excellent. The reader will see the interesting conceptual problem that results from these skilled applications of the Bourdieusian apparatus, however. One author uses Bourdieu on crisis to suggest that a crisis is precisely the moment when a theory of fields is no longer useful for explanation; the other argues that only via understanding the logic of fields can we understand a crisis. Both are clear Bourdieusian ideas, well-interpreted and well-grounded in his own texts: On the one hand, when disruption arrives, the habitus does not work well and thus reflexivity and perhaps calculative rationality emerges, but, on the other hand, any “external shock” will have its reverberations felt via its translation into the logic of a given field. So what gives?

There is, of course, a strictly empirical answer: They are not really analyzing the same “event” at all. Ermakoff is analyzing the political crisis brought on by the invasion. Indeed, one could say that he is analyzing a small piece of the massive “external” or “objective” crisis that eventually imposes itself on the French literary field. It is the latter that makes up Sapiro’s object of analysis, and, much

like the professoriat and students in '68, these literary folks respond in a fielded way to the external imposition. This, it seems to me, is fair enough as far as it goes. There is no necessary contradiction between the two chapters themselves. But they do raise an awfully interesting issue, given their overlapping conceptual language and their overlapping sources in the writing of Bourdieu. For, as we know from Bourdieu, the empirical object of analysis itself has to be theoretically constructed. Given this, it seems at least reasonable to ask: how fielded is a crisis? How can we render the theoretical apparatus supple enough to provide insight into both instances?

I do not, in fact, think that there is a contradiction between the two ideas. Rather, there is a problem with their articulation. The core issue is the relationship between a crisis and the metafield of power. This can be conceptualized as a set of coherent logics of struggle and exchange, and vision and division, that govern the relationship between different fields. Sapiro's point seems primarily to be that, *given the crisis*, the political field suddenly was able to dictate much more directly struggles in the literary field. Ermakoff's point seems to be that *given the crisis*, actors could not act in an unconsciously fielded way anymore. These two propositions are not in contradiction if we write them in the following way:

Sapiro: Given that the crisis induced a fundamental change in the metafield of power, the relationship between the political field and the literary field suddenly changed.

Ermakoff: The fundamental change in the metafield of power required unfielded behavior for it to happen.

Now we are getting somewhere. For this leads to an understanding of crisis in Bourdieusian terms. A crisis occurs when the metafield of power, which dictates the relationship among fields, changes in an extremely rapid manner, due to actions that exceed significantly the logic of the fields in which they would normally be embedded.

This definition would appear to have a few different advantages. First, massively violent actions such as war, invasion, or natural disasters become likely candidates for "unfielded" action. Second, by locating crisis at the level of the metafield, it leaves available for separate theorization the internal development of crises within a single field. Thus, the first step in a Bourdieusian theory of crisis would appear to be the differentiation of *field-specific crises* and *generalized social crises*, with the latter, it would appear, being defined by unusually rapid changes in the metafield of power, and the disruption of subjective dispositions and habitual actions that result. And both of these would be subcategories of "disruption" understood more generally, which is an even more general term for a variety of different ways in which the field–capital–habitus relationship can be broken up.

Given this, it would then appear that what happens as a result of a generalized social crisis is a rapid change in the exchange rate of different (field-specific)

capitals. Sapiro's language, which at times courts paradox, suggests that the literary field is "synchronized" with the political field in the crisis, and subordinated to it . . . while somehow retaining its own logic.⁴ But what she really means is that, with the occupation and the various "external events," political capital (be it left-resistance-Communist or right-collaborationist-Fascist) started *trading at a much higher rate* in the literary field than it had before.

I have come across an instance that could be interpreted in this way in my own historical work: during the generalized crisis of 1684–1692 in Massachusetts, for a short while in 1692, the *cosmic capital* of the ministers traded at a much higher rate than it had traded in the previous thirty years, especially vis-à-vis that of the magistrates. This granted them some—short-term—crisis power. But it is worth noting that it quickly evaporated; the ministers having taken the hunt for witches too far during the crisis of 1692, elite opinion turned against them, and they lost any serious ability to influence the politics from a strictly Congregationalist position.

This suggests, then, that *rapid fluctuations in the exchange rates of different field-specific capitals* might be the defining feature of a generalized social crisis. Indeed, one might go so far as to suggest that measuring this—subject, of course, to all of the difficulties and theoretical debates surrounding the capital metaphor—might be precisely how to constitute the set of objects of analysis that should be studied. It would also have the effect of bringing capital back into a conversation that has trended toward field and habitus.

At several points in his own work, Bourdieu suggested that the emergence of a field of fields, or space of spaces, and thus the emergence of a metacapital, was intimately related to the emergence of the modern state. He correlates the emergence of modern bureaucratic state power to the emergence of the nation-state as a general social space or "container" of fields. He also suggests that the state's ability to provide an *unproblematic mental order* to the world constitutes its ultimate legitimacy, which is only thrown into doubt "in crisis situations."⁵ He also sees a double process whereby the *separation* of the cultural and economic fields is conditioned on the universality of a state-driven field whose metacapital "enables it to partly dominate the functioning of different fields." This, he explains, is accompanied by "the construction of a unified social space."⁶ This opens onto a large area of research in contemporary sociological theory and historical sociology on the state–society relationship. It does not, however, provide a more robust understanding of the category of crisis. Indeed, for reasons entirely understandable, when Bourdieu touches on the French Revolution,

4. Gorski solves this problem (though not in the context of thinking about crisis) by differentiating the degree of *autonomy* of a field from its degree of *heteronomy*: "I would urge that we draw an additional distinction between autonomy and heteronomy, which are sometimes conflated. Autonomy may be defined as a function of the structuredness of positions within a given field, while heteronomy is the degree to which this structuredness is influenced by other fields. The more systematic and explicit the structure and logic of a field are, the more autonomous it is; the more that structure and logic are distorted by actors and principles of neighboring fields, the more heteronomous it is" (330).

5. Pierre Bourdieu, "Rethinking the State: Genesis and Structure of the Bureaucratic Field," in *State/Culture: State-Formation after the Cultural Turn*, ed. George Steinmetz (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999), 70.

6. Pierre Bourdieu, *On the State: Lectures at the College de France, 1989–1992* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2015), 223.

he seems to want to avoid fetishizing that moment as one of extreme crisis and rupture, something that leads him away from a further interrogation of crisis and instead toward the both reasonable and provocative hypothesis that the revolution was “a stage in the process of the assertion, the rise, of the clerks, the ‘berobed,’ and it basically marked the victory of the clerks. In other words, it was more of a culmination of a process of *longue durée* that began in the twelfth century than an absolute beginning.”⁷

VI

This suggests very strongly that the issue of how and why a crisis arrives—both its “external” origins in famine, war, disease, or, from a different perspective, its “external” origins in political economy—and, when it does arrive, how it is construed, would appear to require significant further study. The latter question—of construal—is left unanswered by the Bourdieusian “rational choice may take over,” by analyses that presume a generalized crisis and examine its manifestation in a given field, and by analyses of the long-term process of modern state emergence. How did the fiscal crisis of the *ancien régime* become about the legitimacy of feudalism? How did the political crisis brought on in Massachusetts by the Glorious Revolution become, briefly in the summer of 1692, about witchcraft? How do people decide what the boundaries of a crisis are, who is the best set of people to deal with a crisis, and which other crises it is connected to? Field-specific capital matters—if a crisis is construed as religious, it will be referred to religious elites to address—but how and why a crisis is construed in a certain way may be a process that is endogenous to the landscape of crisis itself, as a massive struggle for power. Therein lie issues of how a crisis takes on a certain character, how it is assembled and construed as a of luminous sociopolitical object, lending a specific set of meanings to social life during times of trouble.

Ermakoff has argued for the articulation of principles of theoretical turf-sharing, so that we can know when to use rational action theory and when to use field theory to explain historical conjunctures sociologically.⁸ But I see a more fundamental problem. The concepts of field and habitus are specifically designed to render comprehensible the relationship between power and interpretation. Ermakoff has suggested that there are instances where their traction in the world is less than salutary. I agree, but it seems to me this leaves open a large question about what other concepts we need, and suggest that rational choice does not have an effective answer to this issue. In my view, to develop an answer will require the elaboration of a full-blown *crisis hermeneutics*, by which I mean to say, a theory and method for interpreting how people interpret a crisis. How is the backcloth of action rewoven, after it has been torn? Above, I mentioned that a field-specific crisis and a crisis in the metafield of power might be subcategories of a larger category of “disruption.” We can now see that general phenomenon as the disruption of interpretations of the world that are useful for forging coherent

7. *Ibid.*, 345.

8. Ivan Ermakoff, “Theory of Practice, Rational Choice, and Historical Change,” *Theory and Society* 39, no. 5 (2010), 527-553.

lines of action. Some disruptions are both extensive (they occur to many people) and temporally concentrated (they occur in a relatively short period of time), and this is what we mean by crisis. What people do in response is the essence of a sociology of crisis. Some of this sociology can be provided by Bourdieusian concepts, but not all of it.

ISAAC ARIAIL REED

University of Colorado at Boulder