

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-29164-4 - Outline of a Theory of Practice: Pierre Bourdieu

Richard Nice

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

*Cambridge Studies in Social
and Cultural Anthropology*

EDITORS: ERNEST GELLNER, JACK GOODY,
STEPHEN GUEDEMAN, MICHAEL HERZFELD,
JONATHAN PARRY

16

OUTLINE OF
A THEORY OF PRACTICE

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-29164-4 - Outline of a Theory of Practice: Pierre Bourdieu

Richard Nice

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-29164-4 - Outline of a Theory of Practice: Pierre Bourdieu

Richard Nice

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

OUTLINE OF
A THEORY OF PRACTICE

PIERRE BOURDIEU

Translated by
RICHARD NICE



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge University Press
 978-0-521-29164-4 - Outline of a Theory of Practice: Pierre Bourdieu
 Richard Nice
 Frontmatter
[More information](#)

CAMBRIDGE
 UNIVERSITY PRESS

University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of education, learning and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521291644

© In the English language edition Cambridge University Press 1977
 The original edition, entitled *Esquisse d'une théorie de la pratique, précédé de trois études d'ethnologie kabyle*, was published by Librairie Droz S. A. in Switzerland
 © Librairie Droz, 1972

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements, no reproduction of any part may take place without the written permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published in English translation 1977
 30th printing 2015

Printed in the United Kingdom by Clays, St Ives plc.

Library of Congress Cataloguing in publication Data
 Bourdieu, Pierre.

Outline of a theory of practice.
 (Cambridge studies in social anthropology; 16)
 Translation with revisions of *Esquisse d'une théorie de la pratique*.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. Kabyles – Addresses, essays, lectures.
2. Ethnology. I. Title.

DT298.K2B6913 301.2 76-11073

ISBN 978-0-521-29164-4 Paperback

Cambridge University Press has no responsibility for the persistence or accuracy of URLs for external or third-party internet websites referred to in this publication, and does not guarantee that any content on such websites is, or will remain, accurate or appropriate.

Information regarding prices, travel timetables and other factual information given in this work are correct at the time of first printing but Cambridge University Press does not guarantee the accuracy of such information thereafter.

Contents

Translator's foreword	page vii
1 THE OBJECTIVE LIMITS OF OBJECTIVISM	1
Section I: Analyses	1
<i>From the mechanics of the model to the dialectic of strategies</i>	3
<i>From the "rules" of honour to the sense of honour</i>	10
<i>Practice and discourse about practice</i>	16
<i>The fallacies of the rule</i>	22
Section II: Case study: parallel-cousin marriage	30
<i>The state of the question</i>	32
<i>The functions of kinship: official kin and practical kin</i>	33
<i>Officializing strategies</i>	38
<i>Collective beliefs and white lies</i>	43
<i>The ordinary and the extra-ordinary</i>	52
<i>Matrimonial strategies and social reproduction</i>	58
2 STRUCTURES AND THE HABITUS	72
<i>A false dilemma: mechanism and finalism</i>	72
<i>Structures, habitus and practices</i>	78
<i>The dialectic of objectification and embodiment</i>	87
3 GENERATIVE SCHEMES AND PRACTICAL LOGIC:	
INVENTION WITHIN LIMITS	96
<i>The calendar and the synoptic illusion</i>	97
<i>Economy of logic</i>	109
<i>The body as geometer: cosmogonic practice</i>	114
<i>Union and separation</i>	124
<i>Thresholds and rites of passage</i>	130
<i>Reunion of contraries and denial</i>	132
<i>Making use of indeterminacy</i>	140
<i>The habitus and homologies</i>	143
4 STRUCTURES, HABITUS, POWER: BASIS FOR A	
THEORY OF SYMBOLIC POWER	159
<i>Doxa, orthodoxy, heterodoxy</i>	159
<i>Symbolic capital</i>	171
<i>Modes of domination</i>	183
Notes	198
Index	240

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-29164-4 - Outline of a Theory of Practice: Pierre Bourdieu

Richard Nice

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

“The principal defect of all materialism up to now – including that of Feuerbach – is that the external object, reality, the sensible world, is grasped in the form of *an object or an intuition*; but not as *concrete human activity*, as *practice*, in a subjective way. This is why the active aspect was developed by idealism, in opposition to materialism – but only in an abstract way, since idealism naturally does not know real concrete activity as such.”

K. Marx, *Theses on Feuerbach*

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-29164-4 - Outline of a Theory of Practice: Pierre Bourdieu

Richard Nice

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Translator's foreword

Outline of a Theory of Practice was first published in French in 1972 (*Esquisse d'une théorie de la pratique*). However, this English text incorporates most of the changes which Pierre Bourdieu has made since then. The argument is carried further, particularly as regards the concepts of practical logic and symbolic capital, the order of exposition is recast, and, partly for reasons of space, the ethnographic chapters with which the French edition opens have been curtailed.

This text is the cornerstone of an oeuvre which encompasses numerous major works in both anthropology and sociology – which crosses and challenges the boundary dividing their objects, tasks, and theories, and forces attention to the social conditions in which such sciences are possible.

The fieldwork in Kabylia which provided the ethnographic basis for this text and the starting-point for its reflections was carried out amid the tragic circumstances of the Algerian war, which brought to a head the contradictions inherent in the ethnologist's position. This was one factor in Bourdieu's subsequent move into the field of sociology, where the *separation* which is the hidden condition of all academic activity – most insidiously so in the behavioural sciences – could itself be grasped scientifically in the course of inquiry into the social functions of scholarship and the mechanisms of cultural and social reproduction.

The *Outline*, a "reflection on scientific practice which will disconcert both those who reflect on the social sciences without practising them and those who practise them without reflecting on them", seeks to define the prerequisites for a truly scientific discourse about human behaviour, that is, an adequate theory of practice which must include a theory of scientific practice.

The stages through which Bourdieu's work has passed, the problems he has set himself, are of course partly determined by the accidents of a biography; but also by the configurations of the intellectual field in France over a certain period. The commonplace a translator might feel required to adduce in order to extenuate the visible loss entailed in extracting a text from its context touch only the surface of processes which the explicit thrust of Bourdieu's argument, here and elsewhere, enables us to grasp more profoundly as involving more than questions of "translatability". Bourdieu would

[vii]

be the last to regret the shedding of all that the text was immediately and tacitly granted, inasmuch as it bore the social marks which signal a product conforming to the local standards: the signs of recognition eliciting the recognition of already converted readers, the dignifying references, theoretical allusions, stylistic effects, have indeed every likelihood of remaining dead letters once outside the magic circle of belief.

But much more besides the value set on the text is at stake when it circulates beyond its field of production. The most autonomous work contains implicit reference to an intellectual universe whose cardinal points are scientific (and political) positions symbolized, in a given state of the field, by the names of authors or schools of thought or by "isms" which may cover totally different realities in different national traditions. These are the structures of the field of production, its divisions into antagonistic groups and rival schools, which, internalized, function as unexamined principles of perception and appreciation. When these bearings are removed the text becomes open to misreading.

Thus nothing guarantees that, for some readers, this work, written *against* the currents at present dominant in France, "structuralism" or "structural-Marxism", will not be merged with the very tendencies it combats. Less pessimistically, there is still reason to fear that the frequent references made to the Anglo-American philosophical tradition – a heaven-sent weapon against the theoreticism which so strongly characterizes French social science, from Durkheim to Lévi-Strauss – may, when returned to their original universe, take on a significance very different from the one they were given in a context in which that tradition is disdained or unknown, and be seen as a sign of allegiance to positivism (if not as an ingratiating gesture towards the intellectual establishment).

The fact remains that a text which seeks to break out of a scheme of thought as deeply embedded as the opposition between subjectivism and objectivism is fated to be perceived through the categories which it seeks to transcend, and to appear contradictory or eclectic (except when forcibly reduced to one or the other alternative). The provisional eclecticism which can juxtapose Wittgenstein with the young Marx finds its justification in the fact that all the resources of a tradition which from the beginning has made practice the negative obverse of theory are needed in order to think the unthinkable.

R. N.