Centering the Subject: Bourdieu, Foucault and Fairclough on Subjectivity and Agency, Structure and Practice, and Knowledge and Power

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Abstract

The paper is centered on the latter part of the 20th century's theoretical move beyond a framework established by structuralists earlier in the century, which set aside the subject to look at structure. This has opened up whole new ranges of questions to be answered in finding an adequate framework for understanding the subject. Three authors addressed issues of agency and subjectivity, structure and practice, and knowledge and power are Pierre Bourdieu, Michel Foucault, and Norman Fairclough. This paper begin with a discussion of agency and subjectivity, as the acknowledgement of the subject leads into the questions that follow on structure and practice as well as knowledge and power followed by the conclusion that Bourdieu, Foucault and Fairclough all three are in agreement that the former framework of opposition handed down from the structuralist school is inadequate when the subject is brought back into the center of the picture.

1. Introduction

Social scientists in the latter part of the 20th century have been able to move beyond a framework established by structuralists earlier in the century, which set aside the subject to look at structure. These more recent thinkers and writers have sought to bring the subject back into the center. However, this has opened up a whole new range of questions to be answered in finding an adequate framework for understanding the subject. The main questions center around *whom*. In generic terms, *who* is constructing or shaping what and how is it done? More specifically, *who* is creating and formulating knowledge? *Who* has the power to do this? Is it the system or

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an agent? And who is forming these possible formulators? Three authors who address these issues of agency and subjectivity, structure and practice, and knowledge and power are Pierre Bourdieu, Michel Foucault, and Norman Fairclough.

It makes sense to begin with a discussion of agency and subjectivity, as the acknowledgement of the subject leads into the questions that follow on structure and practice as well as knowledge and power. Bourdieu, Foucault, and Fairclough are in agreement that the subject is made or formed by the system/structure in some capacity. The emphasis placed on the subjugation of the subject as a production and formation of the system, and the subject's ability to strategize, create, and produce varies from author to author. In general the term "subjectivity" is used to capture both of these aspects, while "agency" tends to emphasize the latter, although not to the exclusion of the former.

To organize the discussion around the core issues of the paper, the following progression will be followed. First, I will discuss their different perspective for an analysis of subjectivity and agency, which are linked to illustrate the mutual relations between human beings and practice. Next, in the same section, I will discuss the role of structure to illustrate the relation of the subject and the notion of activity to a larger system. Subsequently, I will look at knowledge and power at the same time because both of them are determinants of the relationship between subjectivity and agency, and structure and practice. Following this in the conclusion, I will illustrate my argument by summarizing the theoretical discussion in the previous sections of the paper.

2. Re-locating the Subject: Subjectivity & Agency, Structure & Practice, and Knowledge & Power:

The post-structuralist "school" originated by taking issue with the foundational arguments of structuralism. Most notably, the post-structuralist brought language back into the realm of practice, which Saussure had removed it from. Consequently, the post-structuralists changed virtually all of their focus away from abstraction and toward concepts such as "event", "reality", and "practice". They concentrated their efforts on what is taking place in society and not on what is underlying this action, thus bringing back the lost subject of structuralism to the center of their theories.

2.1. Subjectivity and Agency

Bourdieu speaks of the habitus, durable dispositions which are acted upon by individuals, as being subjected to and produced by the structures (Bourdieu 1977). These cultivated dispositions enable the agent to act. For example, the sense of honor is a disposition upon which an agent may act; but this action is limited by the logic of challenge and riposte, while also having multiple possible manifestations (Bourdieu 1977). He says that every properly trained agent will "produce all the practices and judgments of honour called for by the challenges of existence" (Bourdieu 1977:11). Thus, the structures determine the possible ways in which the agent may act, but Bourdieu has left room for scheming and creativity in the agent. He critiques Saussure's objectivism in the opposition of *langue* and *parole* as limiting the conception of speech and practice to merely execution (Bourdieu 1977). Bourdieu is bringing the subject back into the center and calling for a new model for understanding this other than opposition of objectivity and subjectivity. He proposes a dialectical relationship between the dispositions of the habitus and structure, a topic, which shall be returned, to further below (Bourdieu 1977).

Foucault's description of the subject does not have the same sense of agency that Bourdieu's does. Whereas Bourdieu's subject produces as well as is produced, Foucault paints a more one-sided picture of the subject as a product of the system. Best and Kellner explains that Foucault argues the modern subject is constructed by domination (1991:36). He calls for a stripping of the creative and active role of the subject, looking to the "denuding of agency" in order for new forms of thought to emerge (Best & Kellner 1991: 51). In his discussion of the technique of correction in *Discipline and Punish,* he explains that the aim is to restore the "obedient subject, the individual subjected to habits, rules, orders, an authority that is exercised continually around him and upon him, and which he must allow to function automatically in him" (Foucault 2001:128-9). Prisons are one of many examples he gives of how the system produces the subject. Although it is rare, Foucault has hinted at a subject who is more of an agent even during his genealogical period. As Best and Kellner point out, Foucault does talk about resistance to power, suggesting a subject that is not completely helpless and vulnerable. It was not until he moved from the genealogical period to "technologies of self," which is not the focus of this paper, that he more fully developed these ideas (Best and Kellner 1991: 55).

Fairclough clearly explains his choice of the word "subject" in his book *Critical Discourse Analysis*. He says that subject suggests a double sense of agency—one who is subjected to the institutional framework and one who can interact in it without being shaped or modified by it (Fairclough 1995:39). To explain he gives a dialogue between a police officer and a youth, who labels himself a "skinhead," that illustrates this double sense of agency. The interview has disorderliness about it, as the youth does not behave according to the institutional norms for his subject position. It is possible he is acting on norms of another institution he is a part of, who has constructed his position toward outsiders. Yet he is able to act in the police officer's institution as an agent who has not been shaped into the normal subject position (Fairclough 1995:50-2). Thus, Fairclough stands in agreement with Bourdieu and Foucault that the subject is produced and subjected to the system/structure. The degree to which this subjected individual can then produce is, however, greater for Bourdieu and Fairclough than it is for Foucault.

Bourdieu and Foucault discuss effects of the system on the subject's body as well. Bourdieu demonstrates the "em-bodying of the structures of the world" through his discussion of Kabyle male and female ways of walking. He writes, "The man of honour's pace is steady and determined. His way of walking, that of a man who knows where he is going and knows he will arrive in time, whatever the obstacles, expresses strength and resolution" (Bourdieu 1977:94). In contrast, the woman walks bent, looking down, and not swinging her hips. "In short, the specifically feminine virtue, *lahia*, modesty, restraint, reserve, orients the whole female body downwards, towards the ground, inside, the house, whereas male excellence, *nif*, is asserted in movements upwards, outwards, towards other men" (Bourdieu 1977:94). These cultural virtues do not just exist in the structures or subject's disposition, but are evident in the physical body of the subject as well.

Foucault also demonstrates embodiment of structures in subjects through his discussion of docile bodies subjected to discipline in *Discipline and Punish*. For example, through the disciplinary training of soldiers, their bodies constitute a part of a "multi-segmentary machine" which can march and handle weapons as they were created to do by the institution with power (Foucault 2001). Again in his discussion on torture in *Discipline and Punish*, he explains, "From the judicial torture to the execution, the body

has produced and reproduced the truth of the crime" (Foucault 2001). Foucault's and Bourdieu's subjects demonstrate structural aspects in their own physical bodies.

While Fairclough does not emphasize embodiment in the same way that Bourdieu and Foucault do, he has his own unique contributions to the understanding of the subject. He is largely concerned with the relationship of the subject to a text. Of particular interest in this discussion are his comments on marketization and democratization. In his chapter on the "Marketization of Public Discourse," he explains that the reader of a text is being addressed more and more as a client or consumer, who is given a position of authority. This creates problems for the institution writing the text, which may still desire to maintain authority over the reader (Fairclough 1989). The results are shifts in authority relations between the subject and institution, and shifts in self-identity within institutions (Fairclough 1989). In this discussion of the relationship between the subject and text, one sees the dynamic influence that structure has on the subject and vice versa. Fairclough continues this discussion in talking about democratization in discourse. He mentions the conversationalization of public discourse as a part of a larger societal move toward informalization—rejection of elitism and a move toward democracy. Yet he poses the question of how one knows if this is in fact the motivating factor for resisting impersonal writing, or if rather one is asserting his/her authority as a consumer (Fairclough 1989). Is the subject subjected or is the subject acting in a productive and creative way? The answer is both and the ability to differentiate between the two is a very gray area.

This leads into a criticism of the discussion of subjectivity and agency by Bourdieu and Fairclough who emphasize the subject's ability to break with subjugation. Fairclough talks about denaturalization as the aim of critical analysis. He states, "Thus the adoption of critical goals means, first and foremost, investigating verbal interactions with an eye to their determination by, and their effects on, social structures" (Fairclough 1989:36). This is accomplished through denaturalizing ideology that has been made to seem natural or like common sense so that subjects are unaware of their subject positions. Fairclough suggests that contradictory subject positions are needed to bring about the reflexivity and awareness of one's subject position (Fairclough 1989: 82). As mentioned above, it remains a gray area to determine whether the subject has really gained

awareness of his/her position in relation to the social structures or is still being blinded by naturalization of another sort, remaining subjected to them. Fairclough himself recognizes this possibility (Fairclough 1989: 83). A similar criticism can be made for Bourdieu's attempt to explain how the subject moves from the universe of the undiscussed to the universe of discourse, which allows one to question doxa. He says that a crisis is needed to bring this about. "It is when the social world loses its character as a natural phenomenon that the question of the natural or conventional character...of social facts can be raised" (Bourdieu 1977:168-9). Yet here again, one is left hanging wondering if the crisis, like Fairclough's contradictory subject positions, is really allowing one to recognize one's subjectivity to the universe of the undiscussed. Or does the subject continue to be subjected unknowingly? This question is left hanging among those who address it, while Foucault's overemphasis on the subjugation of the subject may be seen as evading the question.

2.2 Structure and Practice
There is a thin line between the discussion of subjectivity and agency, and structure and practice. As demonstrated above, structure is acknowledged by all three authors as playing a role in the production of subjects. Yet the traditional structuralist model of opposition, such as between *langue* and *parole* or structure and event, is seen as less than adequate by all three authors for explaining who the subject is and the subject's relationship to structure. They are proposing new models, which put the subject back into the center.

As mentioned above, Bourdieu expresses discontent with the objectivity and subjectivity opposition, which has been set up by people such as Saussure. He says practice is not just execution, a by-product of the system according to the logic of certain rules (Bourdieu 1977:24). He moves beyond the "rules of marriage" or "elementary structures of kinship" to look at agents' dispositions to strategize and interact with the structures (Bourdieu 1977:70). He describes a theory of practice as looking at the "dialectic of the internalization of externality and the externalization of internality...of incorporation and objectification" (Bourdieu 1977:72). Put otherwise, he describes it as the dialectic between objective structures and structured dispositions or habitus (Bourdieu 1977:3). Practice theory accounts for the influence of the agent on the structure as well as the structure on the agent. This is demonstrated in his discussion on marriage

strategies in Kabyle culture. There is no rule, which marriages have to follow, but there is a scheming and strategizing on behalf of the agents to use the system as they can to serve their own interests. "The more the working of the system serves the agent's interests, the more they are inclined to serve the working of the system" (Bourdieu 1977:65). The agent has a disposition that has been produced by the system (Bourdieu 1977), but also an ability to produce and change the system through practice.

Fairclough has a similar dialectic to Bourdieu, although he uses somewhat different terms in describing it. He talks about discourse, which is understood through the dialectical relationship of structure and event. "Discourse is shaped by structures, but also contributes to shaping and reshaping them, to reproducing and transforming them" (Fairclough 1989: 73). Discourse is made up of social practice, discoursal practice (text production, distribution and consumption), and text and it occurs within institutions. It uses language as a form of social practice (Fairclough 1989). Language as social practice is socially shaped, but also socially shaping (Fairclough 1989). This is illustrated in the example mentioned previously of the client who is positioned as having authority by the structure. On the one hand, the client can assert his/her authority and cause the structure to have a shift in self-identity; but on the other hand, it is the structure who positioned the client to be able to do this (Fairclough 189:157-8).

While Foucault also rejects opposition as an adequate model for centering the subject, he does not draw on dialectical models as Bourdieu and Fairclough do. In "Truth and Power," he is asked to comment on the dichotomy/opposition of structure and event and a reformulation of the concept of event. He responds by rejecting the evacuation of the concept of event from the structuralist framework, yet he cautions that in bringing it back in not to view event on only one level. "There are actually a whole order of levels of different types of events differing in amplitude, chronological breadth, and capacity to produce effects." Neither a dialectic nor semiotics is adequate for explaining conflicts. He calls for "analyses in terms of the genealogy of relations of force, strategic developments and tactics." A model for understanding this should look at relations of power rather than relations of meaning (Foucault 1995:113-4). He is more concerned with looking at the history of power relations in understanding structure and event rather than an opposition or dialectical model that tries to explain their relationship.

In focusing elsewhere, Foucault has been criticized for not adequately theorizing both sides of structure and practice. Best and Kellner write:

> His genealogical works emphasize domination over resistance and self-formation, and his later works analyze the constitution of the self apart from detailed considerations of social power and domination…Foucault never adequately theorizes both sides of the structure/agency problem. (Best and Kellner 1991:69)

The discussion of practice as a constant interplay between habitus/event and structure is not evident in Foucault as it is in Bourdieu's and Fairclough's writings.

As seen in Foucault's emphasis on relations of power over relations of meaning, the centering of the subject requires an examination of power. Who has the power to produce subjects or structures? Who has the power to create knowledge and reality? These questions of knowledge and power are addressed by each of the three authors.

2.3 Knowledge and Power

Bourdieu and Foucault both have a notion of power as being productive or generative—it produces reality. Bourdieu writes, "The theory of knowledge is a dimension of political theory because the specifically symbolic power to impose the principles of the construction of reality—in particular, social reality—is a major dimension of political power" (Bourdieu 1977:165). In other words, reality is produced by those in power. Foucault explains that power produces reality, domains of objects, and rituals of truth. Also part of this production is the individual and the knowledge he can gain (Bourdieu 1977:194). In Foucault's case "knowledge and power directly imply one another…There is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge" (Foucault 2001:27). Thus, power produces knowledge as well as reality.

Fairclough takes a more asymmetrical view of power as domination. He criticizes Foucault for getting away from a dominating view of power and seeing it rather as part of technologies of institutions, unattached to any particular class or group. Fairclough writes, "An important objective for critical analysis is the elision of power/domination in theory and analysis" (Fairclough 1989:17). He is looking to analyze power asymmetries and

relations of domination (Fairclough 1989). He has a hopeful view that power relations, which constrain and control productivity and creativity in discourse practice, can be overcome through denaturalizing and investigating verbal interactions' determination by and of the social structure (Fairclough 1989, 1995). This issue of denaturalization is important to all three authors' understandings of knowledge and power.

Bourdieu, Foucault, and Fairclough each talk about a kind of knowledge which is taken for granted in a subconscious kind of way. Bourdieu gives this field of knowledge the term doxa, that which is undiscussed and beyond question. He explains that the dominated classes want to bring to light the doxa which is arbitrary and taken for granted, while the dominant classes want to defend doxa (Bourdieu 1977:168-9). In other words, those in power can use doxa, a kind of unspoken knowledge about the world, to maintain domination over people. If in fact power is producing reality as Bourdieu has suggested, it can be assumed that the dominant classes have played a role in producing doxa. Fairclough uses the terms background knowledge, a knowledge base, and naturalization to talk about similar issues. The dominant Ideological Discursive Formation in a society has its norms and ideologies naturalized—given the status of common sense. It positions subjects without them being aware of it. Fairclough distinguishes between ideology and knowledge, saying that ideology involves representations of the world rather than facts to be known (Fairclough 1989: 41-4). The other authors do not make this sharp distinction. Nevertheless, he indicates a creation of reality by those in power, which becomes a taken-for-granted knowledge for the dominated. Best and Kellner write that Foucault critiques a knowledge that seems given and natural, but is actually from sociohistorical constructs of power and domination (Best and Kellner 1991:35). He detotalizes knowledge in his writing, indicating that knowledge is not absolute but rather created by those in power. Foucault uses the term normalization in his writing to talk about the ability of power to make knowledge seem normal, like Bourdieu's doxa and Fairclough's naturalization of knowledge (Foucault 2001). Each is talking about a similar ability of power to produce knowledge which becomes unquestioned and undisputed in a society.

3. Conclusion:

All three authors are attempting to let other voices be heard beyond the dominating voice. Best and Kellner write, "The political task of genealogy, then, is to recover the autonomous discourses, knowledges, and voices suppressed through totalizing narratives." Foucault seeks to unearth these subjugated voices through his focus on genealogies in order to find hidden forms of domination (Best and Kellner 1991:57). Fairclough talks about the deconstruction of discourse, which allows voices beyond the Ideological Discursive Formation in a society to be heard (Fairclough 1989). Critical analysis works toward emancipation from domination of the power holders and knowledge producers. Bourdieu also addresses this in his discussion of unofficial power that Kabyle women have. Men have the official institution on their side, which condemns the intervention of women in marriage arrangements. Yet women have an unofficial power, which he calls a "dominated power", with which to work and strategize (Bourdieu 1989:41). This is not officially recognized by the dominant group, yet it does exist as a part of the practice of everyday life. Like Fairclough, he is recognizing that knowledge is produced by those in power at the expense of letting other dominated voices be heard.

The centering of the subject in the writing of Bourdieu, Foucault, and Fairclough has indeed brought in a whole new range of questions which ask about the relationship of the subject to structures and how each of these is produced. Much of the discussion of production has centered around exposing power and domination that have created knowledge, which in many cases has become common sense and undiscussable to the dominated. In this way subjects have been subjected to a reality of knowledge through domination of the powerful. The question of whether subjects can break with this subjugation is approached from various angles, with various explanations of how this can happen. Bourdieu, Foucault and Fairclough seem confident that this can happen through the dialectical interaction of the subject with the system through practice and all three are in agreement that the former framework of opposition handed down from the structuralist school is inadequate when the subject is brought back into the center of the picture. All three authors have sought a new frame- work which addresses issues of subjectivity and agency, structure and practice, and knowledge and power.

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