

Feminism after Bourdieu

Lisa Adkins and Beverley Skeggs (editors); Blackwell Publishing, Oxford, 2004,
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The discussions contained in this book began in 2002 at the 'Feminists Evaluate Bourdieu' Conference held at the University of Manchester, and is now luckily available for those who are interested, but missed the conference. This collection of essays shows that even if Bourdieu lacked attention to feminist theories – even though he did explore gender relations – his theoretical apparatus has a relevance to feminism, and can be used to produce new directions in feminist theories. In order to achieve this, the authors of this book neither simply place feminist theories in a Bourdieusian framework nor try to modify his social theory in order to accommodate 'feminist objects', rather they try to 'selectively appropriate' (p. 211) elements of his conceptual apparatus in order to inform their analysis. In this book we find a critical interrogation of Bourdieu's social theory, a working with and against it. Contributors reformulate, expand, map and review some of the crucial concepts of his thought 'to address some of the most pressing issues of our time' and to rework and redefine 'the contours of the social as a new ground for feminist theory' (p. 5), as Lisa Adkins says in her introduction.

Adkins and Beverley Skeggs structured this book in three thematic sections, respectively focusing on 'rethinking class and gender', 'symbolic violence and the cultural field' and 'retheorizing the habitus'. The essays of the first section analyse possible new intersections between class and gender; Terry Lovell offers a new perspective in the conceptualization of class and gender looking at the process of class formation as theorized by Bourdieu and at the WLM experience. She engages in particular with questions concerning the units of class analysis. Diane Reay brings to light the realm of emotions and extends Bourdieu's concept of capital through intense empirical research on mothers' involvement in their children's education. She develops the concept of emotional capital, exploring further the extent to which it can be seen as a gendered capital and the possible impact of social class upon it. The last chapter of this section examines different formations of the self, in particular the link between economic and moral value. Beverley Skeggs argues that the cultural resources for self-making are class processes and criticizes the notion of 'habitus' because it is 'premised upon the accrual of property and value' (p. 75) and conceives of culture as an exchangeable value. This, in her view, risks creating a binary dichotomy between dominating and dominated, a game established to middle class advantage where the working class is only evaluated through the dominant symbolic.

In the second section, class inequalities are further explored drawing on Bourdieu's understanding of symbolic violence. Angela McRobbie highlights the widening of class divisions between women through the examination of forms of

female symbolic violence found in mid-evening television programmes. Steph Lawler concentrates on the ways in which identities are conferred on subjects and analyses, through Bourdieu's concept of habitus, the representations of classed femininities. In a similar vein to McRobbie, Nicole Vitellone highlights the important role of media in the legitimation of new forms of social classification and shows how media campaigns, social realist films and ethnographic studies figure the reproduction of social suffering in new ways. In order to deal with how cultural narratives of drugs, their use and embodiment have social effects, Vitellone proposes a revision of the concept of habitus and a critique of the ethnographic method. In the last essay of this section, Bridget Fowler maps obituary narratives and expands Bourdieusian theory with the work of Ricoeur in order to explain 'the continuous reproductive re-enactment of social structures' (p. 148). Obituaries reveal how societies remember; they are part of a wider play of symbolic power.

McNay's chapter opens the third section; drawing on Butler's and Bourdieu's debates on the performative and on Bourdieu's phenomenology of social space, she tries to overcome the contraposition between materialist and cultural feminism, arguing that gender should be understood as a lived social relation, and that treating experience as a relational entity 'can begin to reconnect questions of identity formation to a context of visible and latent power relations' (page ref). Lisa Adkins questions both the association made between reflexivity and detraditionalization and Bourdieu's assumption regarding critical reflexivity and social transformation, arguing that reflexivity does not concern freedom from gender but is actively reworking the social categories of gender itself. Anne Witz suggests that 'feminist appropriation of Bourdieun sociology will be facilitated by first effecting an anamnesis of the hidden anthropological labour of construction in his work' (p. 221) because, she argues, it is useful to make a distinction between anthropological and phenomenological labours of construction in particular with regard to the concept of 'habitus'. In the last chapter of this book, Elspeth Probyn uses the concept of habitus as heuristic device to position emotion and affect. She stresses the tendency in Bourdieu's work to sidestep the significance of a feeling body and therefore develops the notion of affective habitus, a habitus charged with physicality.

The kaleidoscopic insight offered by this collection whetted the appetite for further redefinitions of the relationship between feminist and social theory and I do hope therefore that it won't remain the patrimony of feminist readers only.

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