

## MERLEAU-PONTY'S MANY-LAYERED PRESENCE IN BOURDIEU'S THOUGHT

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**ABSTRACT:** Why has Pierre Bourdieu's thought come to matter so much in our time? This paper intends to prove that the answer lies in the (partly concealed) presence of Merleau-Ponty's philosophical tenets in many aspects of Bourdieu's manifold oeuvre. They steer it decisively and, though formerly undetected, give access to their deeper meaning. Besides, most obscurities in Bourdieu's output become dispelled only if we scrutinize its roots in Merleau-Ponty's thought. Accordingly, the thorny Bourdieuan notions of habitus, field, diacritical standpoint, structure of position-takings, cultural capital, scholastic fallacy, or reflexive sociology are to be elucidated with the aid of intellectual tools supplied by Merleau-Ponty, like operant intentionality, embodied significance, the invisible, the *pensée de survol* or hyperdialectics. We conclude that, at odds with most social theories, Bourdieu's account preserves the existential inscrutability of human demeanour thanks to its Merleau-Pontian ingredients.

**KEYWORDS:** Merleau-Ponty; Bourdieu; Operant intentionality; Embodied significance; Habitus; Field, Diacriticism; Structuralism; Embodiment; Cultural capital; Scholastic fallacy; Reflexive sociology

### I. MERLEAU-PONTY'S THOUGHT UNPACKS THE PHILOSOPHICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF BOURDIEU'S THEORETICAL COMMITMENTS

Why has Pierre Bourdieu's thought come to matter so much in our time, and for so many (and so different) people? The answer, in our view, chiefly lies in the presence (partly overt, partly concealed) of Merleau-Ponty's philosophical tenets in many aspects of Bourdieu's manifold oeuvre. Accordingly, most obscurities in Bourdieu's output become dispelled only if we scrutinize their roots in Merleau-Ponty's thought. An array of unclear statements about the concept of the habitus, for instance, can be elucidated by bringing up its Merleau-Pontian origins. In

general terms, the difficulties that tarnish Bourdieu's doctrines can be overcome by looking at their starting point in Merleau-Ponty's philosophy.

Besides, Merleau-Ponty's thought furnishes the resources for tapping the deeper meaning of many Bourdieuan doctrines. On the one hand, the manifest influence exerted by Merleau-Ponty's in the work of Bourdieu has been admitted by the sociologist, earning noteworthy commentaries. On the other hand, there is the surreptitious presence of Merleau-Pontian themata in many aspects of Bourdieu's thought. We contend, indeed, that a lot of many-faceted Merleau-Pontian impulses are active in Bourdieu's oeuvre but have gone undetected. They managed to steer it, and therefore they are noteworthy.

*The notion of "operant intentionality" commands the link between Merleau-Ponty and Bourdieu*

Unimpressed by the usually loose talk about "body", "embodiment", "the others", and similar terms, we hold that the key notion in the link between Merleau-Ponty and Bourdieu is the concept of "operant intentionality" (named also "lateral", "total", "latent", "bodily", "incarnate", or "practical", and opposed to "thetic", "representation-bound" or "act intentionality"). The Husserlian origins of this notion notwithstanding (in fact "operant intentionality" translates the unnamed but conspicuous *fungierende Intentionalität* in Husserl), it articulates both Merleau-Ponty's thought and its thrust upon Bourdieu's output. We intend to prove, among other issues, that Bourdieu's habitus defies understanding if its origins in Merleau-Pontian operant intentionality are not considered.

The notion of operant intentionality is so crucial for the present context that some precisions are in order. Whereas "thetic intentionality" corresponds to the acts of representative consciousness and grounds our judgement and willed action, "operant intentionality" founds the natural and pre-predicative unity of world and human existence. Preceding all thetic attitudes, it is opaque to reflexion because it is precisely what makes it possible. It is also the practical and bodily link between the world and all living organisms and consequently the ground for their active intervention on their surroundings. Developed animal behaviour not only involves vision and memory but is capable of the synthetic apprehension that undergirds operant intentionality.

*Merleau-Ponty's huge influence on Bourdieu's intellectual development*

Bourdieu's work reconsiders the main themes of *Phenomenology of Perception*. In broad terms, he puts up roots in Merleau-Ponty because he extracts the social consequences of operant intentionality, adopts the language of the body, endorses pre-reflexivity and speechlessness, and espouses an anti-intellectualist commitment. In sum, Bourdieu esteemed Merleau-Ponty's thought because it 1) delivers a convincing account of scientific progress in the human domain, founded on first-hand knowledge of philosophy and biology; 2) rejects transcendental and hyper-cognitivist versions of phenomenology; and 3) pursues a political involvement using philosophic tools.

At the outset we should be aware that Merleau-Ponty's intellectual attitude is similar to Bourdieu's. Both thinkers are always at the crossroads, threatened by ambiguousness, committed to arbitrating extant Manichaeisms. They share an effort to blend and synthesize, and often succumb to the "paralyzing effect", as Sartre used to say, of mediating endeavours. In a word, they are attracted by the grey zone of the "either...or..." and "neither...nor...". Further attitudes shared by Merleau-Ponty and Bourdieu: a pretence of scientism (Bachelardian constructivism for Bourdieu, willed proximity to the human sciences for Merleau-Ponty); a common perception of Lévi-Strauss as figurehead of radical objectivism; and a blend of academic conformism with a rebellious and creative streak.

Bourdieu's approach, indeed, is full of Merleau-Pontian overtones. Both authors affirm the immediate and reciprocal "inhabiting", grounded on operant intentionality, of humans and world; the carnal entanglement with forces that convey invisible interdictions; the simultaneous working of these forces both from within (socialization of cognition and affect) and from without (they shape desires, choices, possibilities, constraints); and the embodied nature of knowledge, holding that it actually consists in situated "knowing-how-to", blind to itself and immune to discursive consciousness. Above all, Bourdieu is faithful to Merleau-Ponty's thought when he conceives the practical agent as capable of understanding the world *without objectivizing distance*. In so doing, he gives up the mentalism and intellectualism dear to the "uninvolved beholder" so much derided by Merleau-Ponty.

Both Bourdieu and Merleau-Ponty agree that philosophy must overthrow the

idol of the “almighty look”, though they differ on the issue of its proper pursuits. According to Merleau-Ponty, philosophy must extend itself to non-philosophy (painting, literature, science), whereas Bourdieu is in favour of forsaking the theoretical logic of the “uninvolved beholder” and replacing it by practical (*i.e.*, pre-objective) logic. In fact, *their respective positions are complementary*. On the one hand, Merleau-Ponty’s oeuvre aids to unpack the philosophical significance of Bourdieu’s doctrine. On the other hand, Bourdieu underscores the (normally occluded) social-political-historical relevance of Merleau-Ponty’s thought.

Above all, the respective ways of thinking of these two authors share a centre. Both focus on “embodied significance”, that is, the experience of the lived, unreflectively felt body transformed into a distinctive mode of existence and exerting a mediating role between the subjective and the objective (mental and physical) realms. In this respect, Merleau-Ponty’s notion of “intentional arc” points out to the non-representational and non-objective (*scil.* operant) intentionality that projects round about us all aspects of past and future situations and which in its turn results from them. In other words, “intentional arc” means a generalized awareness of the way in which dissimilar aspects of our experience are interconnected. It provides an affective sensibility that subtends our thetic acts and endows an array of sundry experiences with an affective unity that confers them a synthetic meaning. For both Merleau-Ponty and Bourdieu, indeed, reason exists as “the ways of the body” and must be understood as the corporeal awareness that precedes any representation. According to both authors, the body encodes history and power.

Yet Bourdieu improves on two counts Merleau-Ponty’s upholding of the lived body: 1) he elucidates from a social-historical perspective the incorporated structures of operant or practical intentionality; 2) through the concept of habitus he investigates the social construction of the generative schemes of the body. The habitus, indeed, explains the permanence of structures of domination and social division. It functions, so to say, as “the flywheel of society”, to use the simile William James applied to acquired habits.

In short, Bourdieu draws on extensively from Merleau-Ponty’s account of how the body ensures both the sedimentation and the activation of past experiences. The habits of the body are viewed as syntheses that are neither intellectual nor mechanical, defy both explanation and reflection, and answer to situations that

can differ widely among themselves. Whereas Merleau-Ponty takes the bodily dimensions of habit as his point of departure, in Bourdieu's view class-prescribed habits are ultimately determinant.

In overview, therefore, the many-sided parallelism of Merleau-Ponty and Bourdieu justifies the task we have set in the present paper. In what follows, the Bourdieuan notions of habitus, field, structure of position-takings, cultural capital, scholastic fallacy, or reflexive sociology, among others, will be explored with the aid of intellectual tools that loom large in Merleau-Ponty's output, among them operant intentionality, embodied significance, "the invisible", overflying thought or *pensée de survol*, and hyperdialectics. The quandaries raised by Bourdieuan concepts, in short, will become clarified by inspecting their Merleau-Pontian origins.

## II. MERLEAU-PONTY'S SUPPORT OF OPERANT INTENTIONALITY DISPELS SOME OBSCURITIES AROUND BOURDIEU'S HABITUS

Bourdieu's concept of *habitus*<sup>1</sup> historicizes Merleau-Ponty's doctrine of lived embodiment, bent on replacing the transcendental subject with the situated body, conceived as a source of operant or practical intentionality and capable of constituting intersubjective reality. Likewise, Bourdieu scrutinizes from a socio-historical perspective how the structures of incorporated intentionality came into being. In other words, he surveys the social determinants of the embodied structures or schemes that the agent puts to work to construct the world.

In the wake of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy, thus, the Bourdieuan habitus came out as a manner of promoting a form of integration of experience and understanding attuned to the possibility of "openness to things without concept" and opposed the post-Cartesian urge towards intellectual possession. We must keep in mind that the habitus is a non-intentional, un-willed phenomenon that is (almost) never an explicit object of intentional awareness. The habitus resists to

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<sup>1</sup> One task of Bourdieu's *habitus* is to elucidate the issues, such as history, tradition, and time, which according to Merleau-Ponty were accounted for by the notion of "institution". If there is a past that precedes and generates all subjective experiences, if there is a tradition that has always already been before there was any individual work, "institution" signifies that in an experience (or an artifact) are set up certain dimensions in relation to which a whole series of later experiences will have meaning and form a history.

being intentionally apprehended on account of its pervasiveness and improvisational character. It should be stressed that the dispositions which form the habitus properly *are not habits* owing to their generative or creative exchangeability. The Bourdieuan habitus can engender quite different practices or even diametrically opposed conducts in different social situations.

*The habitus is a product of history that brings about history*

The concept of habitus designates the array of long-lasting and transposable dispositions through which we perceive, judge and act in the world. This unconscious layering of schemata is acquired through long-term exposure to specific social conditions and the correlative internalization of constraints and opportunities. They inscribe into the body the changing influence of the social milieu, though filtered at every moment by the habitus itself on account of the limits set by earlier experiences.

The habitus mediates between past influences and present stimuli. It is at once *structured* (by the patterned social forces that produced it) and *structuring* (it gives form and coherence to the manifold activities of an individual across the diverse areas of existence). Accordingly, the habitus determines both social continuity (it hoards social pressures into the individual body and preserves them across time) and discontinuity (it is susceptible to new dispositions and fosters innovation when facing an unmatched social setting).<sup>2</sup> Its chief feature is that objective social inequalities are displaced into the body, where they become naturalized as subjective dispositions.

Bourdieu defines habitus in suggestive ways: “the product of structure, producer of practice, and reproducer of structure” or “the practice-unifying and practice-generating principle” that permits “regulated improvisation”. This is one of Bourdieu’s canonical characterizations: “The structures associated with particular conditions of existence produce [habitus](#), systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles of the generation and structuring of practices and representations which can be objectively ‘regulated’ and [thus

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<sup>2</sup> Merleau-Ponty’s work contributes in many ways to grounding Bourdieu’s contention of a foundational complicity of body and world, though embodied experience, according to Bourdieu, is shaped by the power relations particular to a given social position.

appear] ‘regular’ without in anyway being the product of obedience to rules, objectively adapted to their goals without presupposing a conscious aiming at [specific] ends, or an express mastery of the operations necessary to attain them, and being all this, collectively orchestrated without being the product of the orchestrating action of a conductor.”<sup>3</sup>

The notion of habitus aims at transcending the opposition between theories that conceive practice as *constituting* (classical phenomenology, of course, but also all brands of methodological individualism) and theories that view practice as *constituted* (above all, structuralism and structural functionalism). Bourdieu considers social life as a mutually constituting interaction of embodied patterns and dispositions by means of which social structures (and the embodied “knowledge” of these structures) produce enduring orientations to action that, when put to practice, constitute social structures in their turn. The habitus, in short, encompasses perceptual features and embodied dispositions that organize the way individuals see the world and act in it. The cognitive structures which they carry out in the social world are in fact internalized, embodied social structures.

It can be concluded that the habitus is an extremely ambitious notion, for it purports to designate the system of durable and transposable dispositions by means of which we perceive, judge and act. These unconscious schemata are acquired when external constraints and possibilities become internalized through lasting exposure to particular social conditionings. In Bourdieu’s words, the habitus, a product of history, brings about individual and collective practices, and hence history, following the schemata engendered by history itself. As embodied-operant acquisition, it consists in actual presence of the past (or presence in the past tense), which is at odds with mere remembrance of that past.

This circumstance is crucial, because according to Bourdieu the habitus-driven social practices are embodied and pre-cognitive. The schemes that form the habitus (above all the primary forms of classification) are efficacious because they function below the level of consciousness and language, and so beyond the reach of introspective scrutiny or willed control. In the shortest terms, thus, the

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<sup>3</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Le sens pratique*, Paris, Minuit, 1980, p. 53. The translations from the original French texts are ours (JMB).

habitus is an embodied system of dispositions that amounts, in a sense, to “society written into the body”. This notion, in sum, attempts to fulfil the need for a conception of human action that would account for its regularity, coherence and order without ignoring its negotiating and strategic character.

*The foremost difficulties posed by the concept of habitus*

As we have seen, the habitus transforms subjective and individual traits into objective and institutional features, activates what is passive and makes present what belongs to the past. It brings into light, therefore, the paradox of a spontaneity without consciousness or will. These enigmatic features demand elucidation.

“The habitus is the active presence of the whole past to which it owes its very existence. Thus, it is embodied history, history become nature, and hence forgotten as such. This sort of accumulated capital produces history out of history.”<sup>4</sup> Bourdieu adds that “habitus makes practices autonomous in regard to external determinations”. In Loïc Wacquant’s words, Bourdieu “builds in particular on Merleau-Ponty’s idea of the intrinsic corporeality of the pre-objective contact between subject and world in order to restore the body as the source of practical [*sc.* “operant”] intentionality, as the fount of inter-subjective meaning grounded in the pre-objective level of experience”.<sup>5</sup> The role of the “operant intentionality” in the conceptual minting of the habitus, though, has been neglected by key commentators. Witness the condescending tone adopted by François Héran: “[In the habitus,] we must presuppose something akin to a retentive power, able to keep the trace of past experiences while discerning the pertinent oppositions, in order to apply them, once systematized, to fresh experiences. These operations are not of intellectual nature and hence they must be placed ‘in the body’. Indeed, the body is the mediator between the sedimentation of past experiences and their ensuing activation. This conversion must be effected by the bodily motricity because it cannot be reduced to a set of plain automatisms.”<sup>6</sup>

Héran’s perplexity regarding the adequacy of the habitus to tackle the

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<sup>4</sup> Bourdieu, *Le sens pratique*, p. 53.

<sup>5</sup> Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc Wacquant, *Réponses. Pour une sociologie réflexive*, Paris, Minuit, 1992, p. 20.

<sup>6</sup> Héran, François, ‘La seconde nature de l’habitus’, *Revue française de sociologie*, vol. 28, 1987, p. 394.



phenomena of embodiment, can be neutralized by summoning Merleau-Ponty's understanding of the active presence of the past in the light of "operant intentionality". Indeed, according to Merleau-Ponty the "operant intentionality" gives access to "a transcendent being not reducible to the perspectives of consciousness". He even speaks of "a past glued to the present", or even more accurately, of "a 'vertical past' that contains in itself the demand of having been perceived". His conclusive verdict has dramatic overtones: "I must have perceived this past", concludes Merleau-Ponty, simply because it has been [*puisqu'il fut*].<sup>7</sup>

Thus, Merleau-Ponty favours "admitting that a consciousness is actually intentionality without acts, *fungierende* [in German in the original], that the 'objects' of consciousness themselves are accretions of meaning around which transcendental life revolves", instead of "positive items deployed before us".<sup>8</sup> By dint of the operant intentionality, in consequence, "we are forced to come back to the social world, with which we are in touch owing to the brute fact that we exist, and which is a world we carry glued to us before any objectivation".<sup>9</sup> In Merleau-Ponty's view, the body executes this all-grounding connection: "My body possesses its world without having to go through 'representations' or to condescend to 'objectivity'."<sup>10</sup> (Founding the habitus on the operant intentionality, however, gives rise to a sort of anti-humanistic understanding that has upset many commentators. Most reproaches are directed at allegedly having denied the social agents "any insight regarding their social situations, which implicitly reduces them to cultural dopes".<sup>11</sup> They are targeted also at the suspected lowering down the biological scale, because the Bourdieuan prospect of "'agents feeling like a fish in water' suggests a less-than-human life in its natural habitat".<sup>12</sup>)

*The presence of Merleau-Ponty in Bourdieu's thought supplies a functional explanation of the habitus*

At a more specific level, Merleau-Ponty's endorsement of operant intentionality justifies some prominent features of the habitus. For instance:

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<sup>7</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Le Visible et l'invisible*, Paris, Gallimard, 1964, p. 297.

<sup>8</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Le Visible*, pp. 291-92.

<sup>9</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception*, Paris, Gallimard, 1945, p. 415.

<sup>10</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception*, p. 164.

<sup>11</sup> Étienne Bimbenet, *Après Merleau-Ponty*, Paris, Vrin, 2011, p. 234.

<sup>12</sup> Bernard Lahire, *L'homme pluriel*, Paris, Nathan, 1998, p. 57.

a) *It allows Bourdieu to sideline consciousness, deliberation, and intention.* The notion of habitus rests upon the pre-predicative strata of experience explored by Merleau-Ponty when taking a cue from operant intentionality. The habitus produces practices in a spontaneous way, which means that they do not follow any pre-given, merely structural rule. Bourdieu is explicit on this issue: “Any belief pushes its roots (and survives as a consequence) in dispositions which operate both below language and underneath consciousness, in the body’s pleats and language’s idioms.” Moreover, he sets forth, “the relative weight of mental representation, of others-directed make-believe and mimetic ritualization as well, depends on social class and level of formal education”.<sup>13</sup>

b) *It explains why the habitus is invisible and fosters invisibility.* Social structures become invisible when screened by the practical know-how imposed by the habitus. As a result, the habitus determines both forgetfulness and actual misrecognition of social constraints. It can be said, in consequence, that Bourdieu’s habitus is a sort of un-observable deep grammar for social action (actually, he employs the term “hexis” when accounting for any stable array of observable bodily attitudes and dynamic schemata).

c) *It elucidates Bourdieu’s “intentionality without intention”.* (Alternatively, it justifies the paradox of an objective meaning not grounded on objective intentions.) How can behaviour be regulated without resulting from rule-following? Bourdieu’s habitus allows all members of a group to adapt to their specific class-position both mentally and motivationally. They unwillingly reproduce socially adequate valuations and judgments of taste. Class habitus, in a word, explains why class-unconsciousness actually supports social classification. A sort of socially-built mental automaton, therefore, takes the place of the proverbial “free subject”.

*The link Merleau-Ponty-Bourdieu genetically explains why habitus has been postulated*

The roots of this concept in Merleau-Ponty’s thought explain both its prominent place in Bourdieu’s oeuvre and its current, widespread appeal. The fine-grained mechanism underlying such notoriety, moreover, comes into view when we dissect Bourdieu’s attempt to account for both objective reality *and* subjective

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<sup>13</sup> Bourdieu, Pierre, ‘Sociologies de la croyance et croyances des sociologues’, *Archives des sciences sociales et des religions*, vol. 63, 1987, p. 160.

meaning. We conclude, in short, that his chief aim was to arbitrate between two opposite mindsets:

*a)* The habitus stands for a natural, domestic, habitual, “indigenous”, life-worldly brand of culture, upon which all objective discourses depend and that, in its turn, springs from operant intentionality and thus feeds on the possibility of “openness to things without concepts”. This origin explains why it is both inherited and re-enacted by individuals and geared to subjective meaning.

*b)* Conversely, there is an objectified, socially acquired, artificial, “colonialist”, system-worldly kind of culture (typified by the competing discourses of the objective sciences), dependent onthetic intentionality and thus ancillary to the post-Cartesian drive towards intellectual possession and complete evidence. It aspires to observational detachment and claims to represent objective reality. Endowed with value and power, it presumes to hold the key to the real world while complaining that “the other culture” jeopardizes this access.

According to Bourdieu, social-structural discernment arises from agents struggling to bring together their (*a*)-culture (*scil.* their habitus) and the value and power held by (*b*)-cultures. The struggle to make both cultures consistent (*scil.* to integrate rationality and experience) leads to objective-structural accounts of social life. This means, in short, that Bourdieu used *b* to articulate the differences between *a* and *b*. He applied objective discourse (*b*) to objectively account for social encounters subjectively understood from *a*'s point of view.

These two cultures, in other words, are respectively represented by the painstakingly wrought concepts of habitus and cultural capital. Under this viewpoint, “habitus” stands for indigenous, inter-generationally transmitted dispositions, while “cultural capital” denotes “appropriated” cultural objects, in themselves devoid of objective value. Conflating these two mindsets, we obtain that the habitus may become culturally modified across a lifespan. Then it can be transmitted in an altered form, prone to be additionally modified in its turn.

In summary, Bourdieu attempted to integrate the discourse of objective sciences and the pre-predicative intentionality upon which scientific endeavours depend. In his view, “objectivism” entails a break between experience and reality and has been linked to “official” culture, whereas “phenomenology” implies continuity between reality and experience and connotes domestic, “life-worldly” or “indigenous” culture. This clash between “cultures” explains why Bourdieu's

tirelessly pointed out the twofold need of breaking with the break (already carried out by mainstream science) with everything immediate, embodied, pre-theoretical or simply practical. A tenaciously held “double-break imperative”, indeed, is a prominent feature of his thought.

### III. BOURDIEU’S ENDORSEMENT OF OPERANT INTENTIONALITY EXPLAINS HIS DIACRITICIST AND RELATIONAL VISION

According to Merleau-Ponty, all forms of perception and expression share a diacritical momentum. Perception belies the classical account of difference opposed to a background of identity. This means, above all, that demarcation among things springs from their reciprocal overlapping. The clash of their differences, to put it otherwise, determines their identity. Merleau-Ponty approaches perception, in short, as grounded on a system of differences that articulates our experience and converts it in unspoken expression.

In fact, the operant intentionality generates a diacriticist vision by itself. It amounts to a sort of differential or stereoscopic device involving live mindsets and which, as Merleau-Ponty proves on many occasions, cannot but contrive diacriticist. Moreover, in his view the body is already language (even if *mute* language) because it answers the request of the perceived world to which the body is bound by operant intentionality. As a result, perception conceived as a response to a worldly call discloses a primordial “expressive link” with reality. (Regarding language itself, Merleau-Ponty asserts that it must be always both “tacit” and “indirect” because each word “constantly plays against a wordy background, it is always a mere pleat in the boundless fabric of speech”.<sup>14</sup>) In this same vein of thought, Merleau-Ponty insists that “attaining a faithful account of perception, that is, without transforming the perceived thing into an object, or into the meaning to which it is reduced by insulating and reflexive viewpoints”, demands “perceiving differences [as] deviations from a standard that is not a perceived object”.<sup>15</sup>

Small wonder, therefore, if Merleau-Ponty interprets reality as composed of

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<sup>14</sup> Merleau-Ponty, Maurice, ‘Le langage indirect et les voix du silence’, *Les Temps modernes*, num. 81, 1952, p. 53.

<sup>15</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Le monde sensible et le monde de l’expression*. Cours du Collège de France 1953, Genève, Metis-Presses, 2011, p. 210.

“lines of force” and related concordances instead of positive things. He understands the world as an arrangement of relations and not a substantial reality that would function as the ontological ground of perceptive endeavours. What we call “world”, in his view, is a network of relations where anything exists by dint of everything else, which converts individuals (things and events) in thoroughly virtual centres. Their manifest, visible appearance can be reported to the intermingling of the relations that make up the network. Reality is a spread of relations where each thing is the “zero-point” in which the “rays of the world (*rayons du monde*)” meet one another. Bourdieu’s relationism, in a word, was anteceded by Merleau-Ponty.

The diacritical frame of mind taken over from Merleau-Ponty explains some of the more upsetting features in Bourdieu’s thought. Not only the deeply diacritical structure of the habitus (in the social world, indeed, “to exist amounts to being different”<sup>16</sup>) but also Bourdieu’s relentless rejection of dyadic interactions (*i.e.*, his casting doubt on what he called “the myth of face-to-face interaction”) are justified by his allegiance to diacriticism. Yet Merleau-Ponty had already pointed out that consciousness never restricts itself to confronting a unique, isolated object amid an exclusively dual relationship.

Above all, Bourdieu’s endorsement of the diacritical vision inherited from Merleau-Ponty determines his crucial conception of the social *field*. The core thesis of this doctrine is that social-material and symbolic-mental structures prolong each other by virtue of their underlying homology, thus wrecking the well-threaded dichotomies of internalism *vs.* externalism or text *vs.* context. Social relationships, in short, are accounted to by Bourdieu from a diacritical viewpoint.

Some precisions about Bourdieu’s doctrine of the differential constitution of social fields are now in order. He pays special attention to the fact that several areas of social life (such as art, science, religion, politics, the economy, or the law) tend to form separate microcosms endowed with specific rules, routines, and forms of authority. Bourdieu calls “fields” these would-be autonomous spheres. Their “historical” character must also be stressed: they are transient social assemblages, for they come up, grow, evolve, and eventually decline and fade away. In a few words, a field confers some degree of autonomy (a crucial

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<sup>16</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Raisons pratiques*, Paris, Seuil, 1994, p. 38.

requirement) to both a structured area of social positions and a space of antagonisms.

Indeed, on the one hand a field is a structured space of positions, not unlike a “force field” coercing everyone involved. On the other hand, a field is also an arena of confrontation, because its agents and institutions attempt to maintain or even capsize the existing allotment of capital. In tune with Bourdieu’s agonistic mindset, a field is a battleground where identity and precedence are continually fought for. In addition, a degree of autonomy is also a property of any field, though contingently submitted to fluctuations along time. As a rule, a field attempts to shield itself against external pressures to make its own evaluative criteria prevail over those of potentially intruding fields. Yet in a field takes place an ongoing clash between the agents holding dominant positions (whose main target, therefore, is to protect the established standards of autonomy) and the agents attempting to introduce heteronomic criteria to improve their now dominated position.

Above all, a field shapes both action and thought from without, not unlike the way, it should be noted, habitus contrives practice from within. A field, so to say, suggests to its agents an array of viable stances and moves, each with its related profits, costs and ensuing outcomes. Every position in the field, in other words, predisposes its holder towards specific patterns of thought and conduct. They can be quite different, for the order and criteria that prevail in the field are likely to be prized by the settled members and challenged by the newcomers. Agents who hold dominant positions are expected to deploy conservative strategies, because they are interested in maintaining the existing distribution of capital. In contrast, the agents relegated to subsidiary positions tend to adopt “seditious” lines of conduct.

Bourdieu replaces the common-sense connection between the individual and society by the constructed relationship between habitus and field. Social action is thus determined by the link between “history incarnated in bodies” and turned into a set of dispositions, and “history objectified in things” and transformed in a system of positions. In short, neither habitus nor field steer action one-sidedly. Bourdieu ascribes this power only to the complicity (or occasional antagonism) of mental and social structures (that is, the alliance of subjective dispositions with social positions). Explaining action, therefore, involves the social makeup of the

agents on the one hand, and on the other the structure of the social universe within which they act (together with the specific conditions under which they encroach upon each other).

Bourdieu's account of the social fields yields interesting results when applied to cultural products, as far as they arise in a sort of differential space and thus are quite unable *not* to be meaningful. They reveal a fit between two congruent patterns: *a*) the structure formed by such products (genres, styles, forms, themata, etc.); *b*) the structure of the field, that is, the array of positions (authors, schools) featuring a "field of forces" alongside a "field of struggles" and configuring a space of *prises de position* ("position statements" or better "position-takings"). Significantly, Bourdieu conflates the claims of both internalist and externalist (or formalist and sociological) approaches by casting the "space of cultural products" as a diacritical system homologous to the "space of position-takings". Indeed, the identity of such "position-takings" depends on their reciprocal relationship, so that their assemblage can only be diacritical. To that extent they are akin to linguistic phonemata, constituted by differential oppositions and lacking positive identity.

#### IV. OTHER ASPECTS OF BOURDIEU'S OEUVRE ARE CLARIFIED BY ITS CONNECTION WITH MERLEAU-PONTY'S THOUGHT

Besides explaining some enigmatic traits shown by the concept of habitus and grounding the diacritical vision that inspires several aspects of Bourdieu's thought, the Merleau-Pontian heritage, axed on operant intentionality, sheds light on other characteristic features: Bourdieu's vindication of the "invisible", his penchant for "reflexive sociology", his rejection of formalist and intellectualist biases within phenomenology, his feud with structuralist objectivity, and his peculiar approach to language.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Other manifold homologies evinced by our two authors: Bourdieu's difference between *lector* and *auctor* (the commentators of already existent discourses *vs.* the producers of new discourses) corresponds to Merleau-Ponty's difference between the languages *parlant* et *parlé*. Merleau-Ponty's "style" to Bourdieu's "constancy of dispositions". Merleau-Ponty's intellectualism attached to *thetic* intentionality to Bourdieu's "scholastic *i.e.*, epistemocentric bias" or *skohlé*. And Merleau-Ponty's "anti-intellectualist upshot of operant intentionality" to Bourdieu's "dispositional mindset" or "*sens pratique*".

*The primacy of “the invisible” in Bourdieu’s thought*

Drawing on the vocabulary of Merleau-Ponty, Bourdieu’s habitus appears as a mediator between the *invisible* and the *visible*, being the invisible (such is Merleau-Ponty’s hint) what operant intentionality must cope with. If in general terms the habitus gives formal coherence to actions that are materially vastly different, specifically it mediates between the *invisible* system of structured relations (by which actions are shaped) and the *visible* actions of the agents (which structure the relations themselves). Therefore, it can be observed only in its actualizations, that is, when the fitting occasion allows a virtual disposition to manifest itself in its actuality. In other words, the habitus is essentially “history become nature” (“the active presence of the whole past”) yet forgotten as such and hence “invisible”. The habitus, in short, can be likened to an unobservable “deep grammar”. Small wonder, then, that Bourdieu sees in the habitus a factor of misrecognition that obscures many effective constraints in social life. He explicitly points out that the habitus, as “*modus operandi* that forms every thought and action (including the thought of action), reveals itself only in the *opus operatum*”.<sup>18</sup>

Most importantly, Bourdieu exemplifies his approach to invisibility with his rejection of dyadic interactions. He opposes conceiving individuality as an intersubjective issue supported by our pragmatic interaction with others. In his view, social relations are *not* extrapolations of a primal dyad of interaction. In contemporary society at least, both individuality and experience of self are connected to wider social structures. They are *not* dialogical in nature, originated by the interaction with the “Other”. As Bourdieu says, “‘interpersonal’ relations are never individual-to-individual relationships”.<sup>19</sup> The emotional life, likewise, far from being spontaneously given, is a social relation that mediates between embodied subjects and collective structures. To understand interpersonal relations, therefore, the level of phenomenal immediacy must be overstepped and eventually integrated into a structural whole. As Bourdieu puts it, “the truth of any interaction is never entirely to be found within the interaction as it avails itself for observation” because interactions “mask the structures that are realized in them. This is one of the cases where *the visible*, that which is immediately given,

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<sup>18</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Esquisse d’une théorie de la pratique*, Genève, Droz, 1972, p. 43.

<sup>19</sup> Bourdieu, *Esquisse*, p. 275.



hides *the invisible* which determines it”.<sup>20</sup>

*Bourdieu's reflexive sociology replicates the vigilant attitude of Merleau-Ponty's hyperdialectics*

Both approaches critically engage in a constant back-and-forth between (first person) lived experience and (third person) objective accounts. On the one hand, Merleau-Ponty held that dialectical thinking could be brought about only in form of un-thematized, un-totalized practice, resolutely opposed to stating its aims in form of theses. In other words, dialectics makes sense as conscience but not as philosophy, because it cannot be cast as a series of statements. On the contrary, its proper task would be to safeguard the cognitive output of operant intentionality. While therefore transcending any self-enclosed set of statements, a “good dialectics”, in Merleau-Ponty’s view, should give rise to anti-positivist ways of thinking directed to the “dialectics without synthesis” that he names *hyperdialectics*.

Merleau-Ponty’s invitation to vigilance, on the other hand, is echoed by a distinctive feature of Bourdieu’s social theory: his insistence on *reflexivity*. This term designates the operation of turning the procedures of social science back upon the sociologist, aiming at neutralizing the misrepresentations (cognitive twists that reinforce each other) which often mar an adequate construction of the social object. Bourdieu is confident that the sociologist can “objectivize the point of view of objectivity” without falling into the trap of relativism. There is no alternative, in his view, to knowing the cognitive limits that affect sociologists and the interferences they endure as members of the “dominated fraction of the dominant class”. “Sociology”, says Bourdieu, “must include a sociology of the perception of the social world, that is, a sociology of the constructions of visions of the world which themselves contribute to the construction of this world.”<sup>21</sup>

The need for reflexivity follows from the distortions that inevitably baulk the construction of the social object. These intrusions, according to Bourdieu, obey to several factors. Apart from the gender, class, ethnicity, and education of the researchers, their position in the intellectual field is a decisive feature. It determines their vigilance upon the received concepts, questionings, and procedures, as well as their resistance towards disciplinary and institutional

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<sup>20</sup> Bourdieu, Pierre, ‘Social space and symbolic power’, *Sociological Theory*, vol. 7, 1989, p.16. Our stress (JMB).

<sup>21</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Choses dites*, Paris, Minuit, 1987, p. 130.

constraints. Yet in Bourdieu's view the most understated cause of bias is the *scholastic fallacy*. This term designates the contemplative attitude that the social scientist habitually takes for granted. It springs from the propensity to adopt the viewpoint of the "impartial spectator", delighted in hovering above the world rather than being immersed in it and so correlative to the *pensée de survol* or overflying thought so tenaciously belittled by Merleau-Ponty. This willed outsidership is also most unwelcome in Bourdieu's eyes because it tends to (mis)construe the social world as a riddle fit for scholarly showing-offs, while social agents actually experience it as a jumble of adaptive commitments.

*Both Merleau-Ponty and Bourdieu decry the formalist and intellectualist varieties of phenomenology*

Bourdieu's early philosophical training culminated in an empirical investigation of the phenomenology of affective life. Yet he soon rejected the intellectualist strain of the phenomenological tradition that initially had attracted his interest. He concluded that it prevents from focusing on the social construction of the schemata with which the agents construct the world. (While Husserl did not ignore the problems tackled by the notion of habitus, *i.e.*, why the traces left by our past experiences—the impressions that are "always there"—go on determining our present experiences, in his view the habitus is ancillary to a transcendental identity. Within the originary experience, a pre-social subjectivity faces the world in full consciousness.)

Among other reasons, Bourdieu was interested in Merleau-Ponty's thought because, in his view, focusing on consciousness was utterly misleading. Accordingly, he dubbed "phenomenological" all approaches attempting to explicitly apprehend, as he says, the "representational truth" of primary experience, *i.e.*, the conscious relationship of familiarity with the social environment. He pointed out that this uncritical grasp of the social world cannot reflect on itself and thus it is unable to apprehend its own conditions of possibility. From his perspective, notions like "lived meaning" or "taken-for-granted knowledge" are regulated by a social context of hierarchical relations which an objective analysis can bring to light. Above all, Bourdieu's diffident attitude towards phenomenology transpires in the misrepresentations he inflicted on this doctrine. Under the term "social phenomenology", he blended several schools of sociology, such as interactionism, ethnomethodology, and Alfred Schütz's brand

of phenomenology. In Bourdieu's view, these approaches remain focused upon the interpretive horizon of the agent and fail to step back into the social-structural context from which this horizon emerges.

Bourdieu brings three charges against the cluster of theories he called "social phenomenology": 1) not perceiving the differences among the interpretive frameworks of particular groups; 2) not examining the conditions that give rise to particular frameworks and impose differences between them; 3) not recognizing the relations of power that allow one framework to acquire greater legitimacy and recognition than others. In fact, Bourdieu attacks the straw version of phenomenology set up by himself, for the canonical version of this doctrine was more attuned to embodiment than he would ever allow, as shown by the Husserlian origins of operant intentionality. Insistently vindicating the cognitive resources of the body, in sum, does not mean having left Cartesian dualism behind. Yet again the comparison with Merleau-Ponty's thought illuminates this issue. Bourdieu's persistent use of "embodiment" does not include any reference to its biological support and much less an endorsement of the brain sciences, whereas Merleau-Ponty addressed current cases of cerebral injury and psychological disorder.<sup>22</sup>

*Bourdieu sees in structuralist objectivity an instance of scientific rationality*

In Bourdieu's oeuvre, the objectivist-structuralist moment, indifferent to the conscious meaning that social actors impose into their thinking and doing, is upheld as a necessary phase of social research. Bourdieu distrusts all approaches (which he calls, as we have seen, "social phenomenology") that focus upon the interpretive horizon of the agents, for they cannot step back and locate that horizon in the operant context from which it emerged.<sup>23</sup> If mere common-sense commands such attributions of meaning, identifying the actual determinants of truly (albeit unconsciously) lived experience becomes an impossible task. In sum,

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<sup>22</sup> In fact, Bourdieu replaces the staple invisibility that can be characterized as "bound to *thetic* intentionality", "*langue*-like", "grounding the scholastic vision", or "attached to the *opus operatum*", by the more refined invisibility that he names "dispositional view" and which, being ancillary to the *modus operandi*, presupposes the operant intentionality.

<sup>23</sup> Merleau-Ponty's and Bourdieu's approaches to human action in terms that follow "operant intentionality" set their effort against two currents of Anglo-American thinking, one of them starting from rational actors consciously taking full advantage of material interests, the other from agents obeying norms.

Bourdieu had to integrate the extremely subjective, lived notion of “operant intentionality” with a particularly objective “structuralist” viewpoint. Following the Pascalian lead, he denied that scientific rationality marks the limits of knowledge. But implanting the existential, lived dimension into a structural outlook became the thorny issue we have tackled elsewhere.

Bourdieu’s rejection of the “scholastic fallacy”, besides, was a sequel of Merleau-Ponty’s anathema against the *pensée de survol* or overflying thought: standing outside (and above) the world furnishes a de-temporalized, totalizing but utterly false view from cognitive, ethic, and aesthetic standpoints. Bourdieu intended to extirpate scholasticism, understood as the frozen array of institutionalized procedures aiming at objective knowledge. But he had to confront an insurmountable paradox: to account for the primary, practical entanglement and ontological collusion with the world, some detachment is crucial because this link should be laid aside by way of analytic reason. To know the world, indeed, the scholastic disposition must hold it at a distance by means of intellectualist self-imprisonment.

Additionally, Bourdieu’s approach to language partly replicates Merleau-Ponty’s. According to Merleau-Ponty, language is both a reprise and furtherance of perceptive life, because operant intentionality and bodily presence prevail over the formalism of semiotics and proto-deconstruction. Thus, language appears as a continuous drive, determined by perceptual experience, towards both de-centring and restructuring. In Bourdieu’s thought, similarly, socially agonistic content is put above the formalism imposed by the cultural pressure of structuralism during the last third of the 20th century.

## V. CONCLUSION

Merleau-Ponty’s influence on Bourdieu patently oversteps the much-commented link between the notions of habitus and embodied significance. It is a fact, indeed, that Bourdieu inherits both the general style of thought of Merleau-Ponty and the troubles he had to cope with. They are manifold and, in the main, spring from his rejection of these issues: Sartrean and Lévi-Straussian intellectualism; the notions of a pure consciousness and its prerogatives; an all-embracing cognitivism; the separation of (or even the irreducible difference between) subject and object; and the antagonism between consciousness and things. Alternatively, Merleau-Ponty endorsed the unity of Being; the dialectics of subject and object;

the self-explanatory circularity cast by homologies, echoes, or correspondences; the continuities between everyday perception and science, common and literary language, “wild” and reflected thought; and the advantage of suggestive metaphors over paralyzing definitions.

Some of these riddles are also present in Bourdieu’s thought of the seventies and the eighties. Indeed, it appears pervaded by the whiff of circularity; the field needs the habitus in order to make acceptable sense; a theory of reproduction seems to be what his doctrine is about; the theorems of homology, congruence and pre-established harmony prevail; and above all there seems to be an ontological complicity between the habitus and the social world it has arisen from, which was the source of ideas like knowledge without consciousness, intentionality without intention and the practical or tacit mastery of mundane regularities.

At odds with most social theories, in short, Bourdieu’s account preserves the existential mystery and attractiveness of human demeanour thanks to its Merleau-Pontian ingredients. Some questions, however, remain for further scrutiny. Should the primacy be given to the Merleau-Ponty—Bourdieu template, based on distrusting most in-betweens that set apart the agent from the world? After all, the habitus has a boundless capacity to generate thoughts, perceptions and actions whose limits, nevertheless, are determined by its socially and historically situated conditions of origination. Or alternatively the primacy of discourses and other shaping factors, usually imposing the sort of mechanical necessity that is typical of things without history, should rather be endorsed?

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