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The individual point of view: learning from Bourdieu's 'The weight of the world'

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**THE INDIVIDUAL ‘POINT OF VIEW’:
LEARNING FROM BOURDIEU’S *THE WEIGHT OF THE WORLD***

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BIOGRAPHY NICK COULDRY is Senior Lecturer in Media and Communications at the London School of Economics. He is the author or editor of *The Place of Media Power* (Routledge, 2000), *Inside Culture: Reimagining the Method of Cultural Studies* (Sage, 2000), *Media Rituals: A Critical Approach* (Routledge, 2000), (co-edited with James Curran) *Contesting Media Power* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2003) and (co-edited with Anna McCarthy, 2004) *MediaSpace* (Routledge, 2004).

ABSTRACT This article explores what cultural studies can learn from the detailed consideration of the individual voice in Bourdieu’s *The Weight of the World* (1999). This book addresses the criticism often made of Bourdieu’s earlier work – that it ignored individual agency in favour of structure – through a depiction of French society’s ‘space of points of view’. Based on in-depth interviews, it offers an intriguing methodology, while leaving unresolved methodological uncertainties and theoretical absences, including a neglect of the role of media and popular culture in everyday experience. To build on Bourdieu’s work, the conclusion suggests we explore how a range of social categories derived from media and popular culture are employed in everyday action and thought.

THE INDIVIDUAL 'POINT OF VIEW':

LEARNING FROM BOURDIEU'S *THE WEIGHT OF THE WORLD*

Introduction

The individual's relationship to the wider space of 'society' and 'culture' remains problematic. While at an abstract level the individual/ social dichotomy is an old issue in social science of limited contemporary interest (methodological individualism being generally unacceptable outside the narrow confines of rational choice theory), at the level of explaining specific actions it remains important. It was Robert Merton who highlighted the tension between socially and culturally transmitted aspirations and the actual opportunities that a society holds out for its members (Merton, 1938): such tensions may be even more acute when the disarticulation between official 'values' (the culture espoused by society's apparent 'centres') and many individuals' perspectives on values and justice is as great as it is now in the war-states of USA and Britain. Such tensions between the individual and the general point of view have been important, if not always resolved, in cultural studies, as Carolyn Steedman (1986) among others has shown.¹ That is a good enough reason to pay close attention to Pierre Bourdieu's attempt in his late work to connect the 'space of [individual] points of view' to his wider sociology; for, even if Bourdieu's own view of cultural studies seemed unhelpfully dismissive (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1999), there are significant parallels between his work and cultural studies' concern with the individual voice, parallels based in the emphasis that Bourdieu, unlike other major sociologists of the late 20th century, gave to the symbolic dimensions of power and inequality.

I want to explore these questions by looking in detail at what cultural studies can learn from one of Bourdieu's major texts of the 1990s, *The Weight of the World* (Bourdieu,

1999). Why is *The Weight of the World* of particular significance? Bourdieu was, especially in his last years, a controversial figure, intellectually and politically, in France and elsewhere, and *La Misère de Monde*, originally published in 1993 and translated into English in 1999, was one of his most controversial books. It is in this book that Bourdieu faced head-on the question of exactly what weight can be given to individual voices in the analysis of the social world, implicitly addressing earlier criticism of his work for neglecting such voices. Notwithstanding some important methodological limitations, Bourdieu in this book goes further than other major social theorists in exploring the complexities of the individual point of view.

There are other, broader, justifications for devoting a whole article to this single book. *The Weight of the World* challenges some ‘postmodern’ readings of the social world, which take a positive view of the fracturing of shared frameworks for interpreting social reality. Against this, Bourdieu and his collaborators prioritised themes, which while hardly ignored in contemporary sociology, have rarely been collected together with such force: the experience of poor housing and unemployment, social and symbolic forms of exclusion (as one of Bourdieu’s interlocutors puts it, ‘a poverty that is hidden’),² conflicts between generations whether in a work or family context, inter-ethnic conflict, the confrontation between the powerful and the vulnerable in the state systems of education or law enforcement, the everyday anxieties of the gendered workplace, the loneliness of the elderly and sick. This concentration on social suffering was, of course, one reason for the book’s controversial status in France, and it raises methodological issues of its own (discussed below), but as an inflection of what sociology should be about in the age of neoliberalism, it surely deserves attention.

Bourdieu's book, however, does much more than prioritise suffering for its own sake; if it did not, it would hardly merit wider theoretical interest. The particular way in which Bourdieu defines social suffering emphasises two symbolic dimensions of conflict which are often neglected: first, the irreconcilable conflict between individual points of view, that Bourdieu takes from Weber but updates for a world of global economic disruption and population movement; and, second, the specific conflict between those who have the authority to enforce their representations of the social world and those who lack that power. Bourdieu's position is political, in two distinct ways: he is arguing both that our conception of politics needs to expand to include 'all the diffuse expectations and hopes which, because they often touch on the ideas that people have about their own identity and self-respect . . . [are usually] excluded from political debate' (1999: 627) and that the wider symbolic and material landscapes within which individuals have no choice but to make sense of their lives are always, themselves, political constructions (1999: 127), whose uneven effects must be examined. It is reasonable therefore to read *The Weight of the World* both as an example of committed sociological scholarship³ and as a contribution, indirectly, to (not quite yet dead) policy debates about social exclusion and the digital divide.

It is true that Bourdieu's work at all times remains within a social science framework: it never comes close to the autobiographical or to recent auto-ethnographic experiments (on which see, Denzin, 2003). Bourdieu's arguments, however, are developed, undeniably, from a critical perspective which seeks to use the sociological imagination to challenge neoliberal 'common sense' (Bourdieu, 1998b). This is not therefore, I suggest, the time to widen disciplinary differences, but rather the time to

explore what cultural studies can learn from Bourdieu's own most searching explorations of what the individual voice can contribute to sociological understanding.

The 'Proper Place' of the Individual in Bourdieu

Bourdieu had a particularly complex notion of social space (cf Brubaker, 1985: 764); unlike Marx, he saw social space in modern societies not as focussed around one organising principle (relations to the means of economic production), but as a space with multiple (if interrelated) fields of competition, where different forms of capital are at stake. In addition, although some critics have suggested otherwise, Bourdieu always acknowledged the complexity of the individual position, at least to the extent that for him individual actions can only be understood by grasping individuals' different structural positions in, and historical trajectories across, social space.

For Bourdieu, individual action is the principal site where social structure can be reproduced, since he rejects any abstract notion of social 'structure' as a determining force in itself; by this, however, he means individual action in a very particular sense, namely the locally improvised actions of individuals that are based upon the 'dispositions' those individuals have acquired, and whose acquisition is itself structurally determined by the objective conditions in which that individual has lived his or her life (the individual's position in social space, including both inherited capital and actual resources, economic, cultural and symbolic). A person's available set of dispositions (or 'habitus') closes off her possibilities for action, by constraining the resources she has to act in the situations she encounters. In the simplest case which Bourdieu imagines, a traditional 'closed' society, because individuals'

dispositions are structurally determined by the very same unchanging forces that determine the situations they encounter, there is a 'natural' fit between people's actions and the contexts in which they act. While it is wrong (as Jeffrey Alexander (1995) does) to dismiss Bourdieu's model as simply deterministic since that ignores the importance he attributes to the improvised details of action, there is certainly a tendency in Bourdieu to look for such a natural fit and to see situations where it does not obtain as the exceptions that have to be explained, rather than, perhaps, the norm that might provoke us into developing an alternative theory (cf Martuccelli, 1999: 137).

Implied in Bourdieu's model, as should be clear even from the extremely brief account just given, is a notion of place. Bourdieu's basic model of social action implies an identifiable, relatively closed place where the fit (or potential fit) between dispositions and situations is worked out. As a leading French critic of Pierre Bourdieu, Michel de Certeau, put it, this whole concept of practice depends on an 'economy of the proper place' (1984: 55). That 'proper place' is either the specific field where an individual seeks to maximise her capital to succeed in that field or the situated body by and through which a particular habitus is acquired and sustained.

Where exactly – in what space - does the habitus get formed? Although Bourdieu's account of these issues is complex and multidimensional, it is reasonable to see a gradual shift of emphasis in his work. For traditional societies, as just noted, his answer seems relatively straightforward; social space is not yet broken down into competing fields of action, and so 'habitus' emerges without reference to the notion of a field (Bourdieu, 1977; 1990a), and its acquisition is tied very closely to the

uninterrupted spatial context of everyday life, in the home and the village. But in complex societies, much, if not most, social action is impossible to grasp except by reference to the specialised field where, according to Bourdieu, it takes place. This creates an uncertainty, as Danilo Martuccelli has noted, as to which is given causal priority: the particular fields where individuals act, or the spaces (no longer limited to the home but including, for example, the school) where individuals' early lives are shaped (Martuccelli, 1999: 129-32)? To be fair, Bourdieu never gives a simple answer to this question. From early on, he recognised the interpenetration of family background and schooling (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1979); other later work (*The State Nobility* (1996)) notes the increasing centralisation of the state's power over the categorisation of social existence that operates through France's network of elite schools and colleges.⁴ Constant, however, throughout Bourdieu's work is an assumption that there still are relatively closed spaces where the determining principles of an individual's practice are internalised. As he says at the opening of *The Weight of the World* the study 'is based in the very reality of the social world . . . it is within each of these permanent groups (neighbours and co-workers) which set the lived boundaries of all their experiences, that the oppositions . . . separating classes, ethnic groups or generations, are perceived and experienced' (1999: 4, added emphasis). Yet in today's mediated world, even the private space of the home has its open 'window onto the world' (television and increasingly the Internet). This point is of more than passing interest. It represents a major gap in Bourdieu's vast *oeuvre* not to have analysed the implications of this media-generated spatial ambiguity for the 'proper place' (if any) of social reproduction. I revisit this point in relation to *The Weight of the World*'s inattention to media and popular culture, but already it should

be clear that Bourdieu's neglect of media culture has significant methodological implications for our assessment of his work on the individual voice.

At the same time, in foregrounding, through the spatially-inflected concept of habitus, the issue of where the individual's dispositions are formed, Bourdieu's approach has advantages over some other sociological frameworks, whether Giddens' structuration theory (1984) or Luhmann's systems approach (1999), neither of which address the tensions between structure and agency so directly at the level of the individual (how agency becomes possible, how it is reflexively experienced). An exception admittedly would be the work of Alain Touraine and those, such as Francois Dubet, who have worked with Touraine at Paris' Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales. They have posed and answered the individual/ social question in a direct and radical way. Both Touraine (1988, 2000) and Dubet (1994, 1995) highlight the identity crisis of the 'de-socialised' individual in a world where 'society . . . is incapable of producing and reproducing itself' (Touraine, 2000: 72), leaving sociology's main subject as the individual's struggle to 'master and construct their experience' (Dubet, 1995: 118). Broadening De Certeau's interest in the consequences of secularisation (Maigret, 2000), Touraine argues for the problematisation of any central principle of social order (Touraine, 1988: xxiv, 118), and the focus on individuals' struggle to produce new, possibly shared, values and culture (Touraine, 1988: 8, 12). In Dubet's work in particular, the outcome of this 'de-socialisation' is left ambiguous. There is, Dubet argues, no necessary hierarchy between a number of competing dimensions of individual experience: first, our sense of social integration, second, the pattern of our rational strategies to acquire capital, and third, our attempt to develop an individual

life-project (Dubet, 1995: 113-114). The question of the social is not abolished, but problematised, as a space whose tensions are focussed in individual action:

. . . the social subject is neither the individual in the outside world who only realizes his individuality in ascetism, nor the social actor fully defined by his roles.

He is the tension between these two elements. (Dubet, 1994: 22-23)

As we review the strengths and weaknesses of Bourdieu's account it is worth asking, therefore, what hold he maintains on such ambiguities, bearing in mind that the tensions around the individual's position in social and cultural space is theoretically important for cultural studies also, because of its concern with the exclusions and power relations within culture (cf Couldry, 2000, chapter 3).

The Space of Points of View

In *The Weight of the World* (1999), the tension between Bourdieu's particular theory of the social world and the irreducible complexity of individual perspectives on that world emerges with particular clarity. Views of this book differ widely and some have seen in it the closest Bourdieu's sociological model comes to collapsing under its own weight (Martuccelli, 1999: 136-141). I take a more positive view and want to emphasise the book's continuities with the concerns of some Anglo-US cultural sociology, as well as with the rest of Bourdieu's work. I also bring out some methodological difficulties and limitations (particularly its occlusion of the everyday media and cultural landscape).

Individual voices were not unheard in Bourdieu's earlier work: such voices are present in numerous quotations in *Distinction* (1984) and in full interview transcripts elsewhere (for example, Bourdieu et al., 1963). The issue however is always: how

much weight individual voices are given in Bourdieu's overall analysis of the social world? For some commentators, the odds are set too heavily against the individual voice; indeed one unsympathetic critic argued that Bourdieu, by privileging social reproduction, was blind to individuals' values and ideals (Alexander, 1995: 137). That criticism takes little account of Bourdieu's long-term concern with attacking the fallacy that substitutes the theorist's generalisations for the individual's embodied practice (1977, 1990a, 2000). More subtle critics like Craig Calhoun argue that Bourdieu gives excessive emphasis to the individual's general strategies of capital acquisition, compared with other forms of individual agency (for example, individual practices of creativity); on the other hand, Calhoun argues, Bourdieu tells us too little about the new structural pressures that expanding information technology and electronic communications pose for individuals (1995: 141-142, 155). In a sense, *The Weight of the World* tries to respond to both crude and subtle lines of critique. Here we do hear many individual voices articulating their values and ideals, and space is given to their adaptations to their position (whether successful or not) and to their view of the world; and we do hear their reflections, if not on the information and communications environment, at least on the new 'flexible' world of work that others (McRobbie, 1998; Sennett, 1999) have analysed in detail.

It would be a mistake, however, to see *The Weight of the World* as a retreat from the ambitions of Bourdieu's earlier structural theory. Bourdieu's sociology has always emphasised how individuals are each differently constrained by the uneven distribution of symbolic power. As he puts it in one of his last books, the *Pascalian Meditations*: 'one of the most unequal of all distributions, and probably, in any case, the most cruel, is the distribution of symbolic capital, that is, of social importance and

reasons for living' (2000: 241). Indeed it may be the central task of critical sociology to confront this:

the social sciences which alone can unmask and counter the completely new strategies of domination which they sometimes help to inspire and to arm, will more than ever have to choose which side they are on: either they place their rational instruments of knowledge at the service of ever more rationalised domination, or they rationally analyse domination and more especially the contribution which rational knowledge can make to *de facto* monopolisation of the profits of universal reason. (Bourdieu, 2000: 83-84).

Or, as he puts it more succinctly elsewhere (1998a: 21), 'we must work towards universalising the conditions of access to the universal'.

This point is essential to understanding the strategy of *The Weight of the World*. As many of its interviews bring out, individuals must live with the consequences of the power that others' point of view has over them. So, for example, we hear of the 'destiny effect' or 'reality principle' (1999: 63, 5-7) imposed by schools' symbolic power over students and their families. Differentials in symbolic resources are linked to other inequalities, of course: differences in economic and cultural capital, but also, less obviously, spatial differentiations which solidify social boundaries through unevenly distributing assets within, and connections across, space (1999: 126-27). Social space involves the patterning of social and symbolic resources which ensures that speaking from 'here' is not the same as speaking from 'there'. Turning again to the formulation of the *Pascalian Meditations*, there is no simple level playing field on which social action takes place:

when powers are unequally distributed, the economic and social world presents itself not as a universe of possibles equally accessible to every possible subject – posts to be occupied, courses to be taken, markets to be won, goods to be consumed, properties to be exchanged – but rather as a signposted universe, full of injunctions and prohibitions, signs of appropriation and exclusion, obligatory routes or impassable barriers, and in a word, profoundly differentiated. (Bourdieu, 2000: 225, cf 134, 183)

It is this insight above all (the insistence on the symbolic dimensions of contemporary social conflict) that makes Bourdieu's work important for cultural studies; and it is this insight that underlies Bourdieu's insistence at the beginning of *The Weight of the World* on understanding the multidimensional 'space of points of view' (1999: 3), in which social actors act and think.

The space of points of view is not the infinite privatised plurality of individual viewpoints that 'postmodern' accounts of society's dissolution, whether broadly optimistic or pessimistic, suggest.⁵ It is a highly organised space where the mutual incomprehensibility of individual viewpoints stems from underlying differences in structural position, dictated by inequality in economic, social and symbolic resources. Such conflicts stem, in part, from agents' awareness of how their share of resources measures up against others' (the 'ordinary suffering' or *la petite misère* (1999: 4) that comes from 'relative deprivation' (Runciman, 1972)), but Bourdieu inflects a Weberian insistence on the incompatibility of perspectives with an emphasis (drawn as much from Durkheim) on conflict over representations of the world, and over the resources to make those representations. Such inequality has a symbolic dimension which cannot be mapped in terms of economic measures of poverty, but is no less

central to grasping how social space is ordered. Specific examples in *The Weight of the World* include the different worldviews of temporary and permanent workers in the same car factory (1999: 257-296, 317-339) where work-based solidarity has been undermined by new forms of work organisation (1999: 275, cf Sennett, 1999), and the tensions between inhabitants of poor neighbourhoods and the media who come to 'represent' them (1999: 99-105). Such forms of suffering (based in an inequality in 'rights over the future': 2000: 225) are precisely hidden from the sociologist's abstract 'quasi-divine point of view' (1999: 3). They only emerge at the level of the individual: conflicts between individuals' ideal of work and the 'institutional bad faith' of particular working settings (1999: 190, 205, 249; cf 229, 241); conflicts between generations over how to value the family's assets (1999: 381-391), and so on. If a common theme through the book is individual loss, what is lost, again and again, is very often the possibility of a perspective shared with others, whether at work, or in politics, or in inter-ethnic relations.

I return later to some important limitations of Bourdieu's analysis. But in its emphasis on the complexities of the space of points of view, it connects with a neglected strain in recent cultural sociology and cultural studies. In classical sociology, C. Wright Mills insisted that 'no social study that does not come back to the problems of biography, and of their intersections within society, has completed its intellectual journey' (1970[1959]: 12); indeed the structural importance of conflicts between society's values and individuals' capacities and resources goes back to Robert Merton's article 'Social Structure and Anomie' (1938).⁶ Even so, work based on that principle in sociology (such as Sennett and Cobb (1972), Gilligan (1982), Skeggs (1997)) and in media and cultural studies (Nightingale (1993), Steedman (1986),

Press (1991), Walkerdine (1997)) has been rare. Yet at stake in this neglected tradition is a broader question of the social impacts of the unequal distribution of symbolic, especially narrative, resources to which *The Weight of the World*, whatever its weaknesses, is an important contribution.

The Weight of the World: Specific Methodological Issues

What is striking about *The Weight of the World* is the emphasis Bourdieu puts on the evidential value of individual narratives:

Situating at points where social structures “work”, and therefore worked over by the contradictions of these structures, these individuals are constrained, in order to live or to survive, to practice a kind of self-analysis, which often gives them access to the objective contradictions which have them in their grasp, and to the objective structures expressed in and by these contradictions. (Bourdieu, 1999: 511)

Here the ‘proper place’ of analysis is not only the site where habitus is formed, but the site where individual narratives of conflict and dissent are articulated and developed over time. At the same time, Bourdieu sharply distinguishes proper sociological treatment of individual narratives from journalistic or popular accounts, whether individuals’ own de-contextualised accounts of themselves (see below) or ungrounded media commentary on social affairs (1999: 628). Both are doxic representations of the social from which the sociologist must distance himself. Implicitly, therefore, Bourdieu raises the methodological stakes at play in using individual accounts of the social world as evidence.

Specifically Bourdieu insists early in the book on not narrativising the interviews in a literary way (1999: 3, 63; cf Grass and Bourdieu, 2000: 26), since ‘writing well’

might obscure the constructed nature of the interview situation. Bourdieu's caution is in line with many sociologists and social psychologists (Potter and Wetherall, 1987; Skeggs, 1997). The practice is, however, not always so straightforward. First of all, perhaps inevitably in such a large multi-authored book, there are lapses, where quasi-literary interpretation takes over from scientific caution. Sometimes this is harmless, as in this comment which legitimates the role of the sociologist-interviewer: 'all she has left is the satisfaction, not without bitterness it is true, of having understood after the event what it was that happened to her, a satisfaction that can help to transform an apparently intolerable destiny into a new, unexpected freedom' (Jean-Pierre Faguer, in 1999: 552). At other times, the distortion goes further. So in Michel Pialoux's interpretation of interviews with car workers, we hear of one interviewee (on page 270) that his relationship to the future is constructed through his children's prospects - "they're doing pretty well", he says with a smile, but he doesn't venture far into territory he doesn't know well, afraid that the future has unpleasant surprises in store for him' - but (by page 271) his relative silence is interpreted as part of a wider 'disillusionment' 'that is tied to the present but also comes out of a whole history: disillusionment that shows in the way he looks at his own past, at his own future or that is his children'. Where do we draw the line between literary overinterpretation and sociological caution?

Bourdieu's own view is clear when he explains the point of the book's interviews:

[which is] attempting to situate oneself in the place the interviewees occupy in the social space in order to understand them as necessarily what they are . . . to give oneself a generic and genetic comprehension of who these individuals are, based

on a theoretical and practical grasp of the social conditions of which they are the product. (1999: 613, added emphasis)

Yet this is itself quite a particular and contentious view of how individuals ‘fit’ into social space, which prioritises the ‘conditions associated with the entire category to which any individual belongs’ (ibid.). Whether there are such positions, conditions and categories is clearly a sociological question, and ruling such a question out in advance under cover of a methodological strategy is itself close to a literary conceit.

It would be quite wrong, however, to suggest that Bourdieu’s approach to the interview material is anything less than cautious and self-reflexive.⁷ First, he is well aware of the degree of self-censorship interviewees probably exercised in the interview situation, particularly around the display of racism (1999: 616, and compare interview on page 33). Second, he is sensitive to the symbolic power differential inherent to the interview situation, and therefore insists on reducing the consequent symbolic violence (in Bourdieu’s term) through, for example, various interviewer comments designed to underplay the formal distance between interviewer and interviewee. Bourdieu calls this practice, slightly oddly, ‘methodical listening’ (1999: 609, emphasis added), even though in his own interview with two young men on a housing estate (Francois and Ali) he does far more than ‘listen’, making various interventions and suggested interpretations which, from another perspective, would be seen as leading questions. He comments (without prompting from the men) ‘and there are lots of problems like this? It’s always the same people who get accused?’ (1999: 65). While this diverges from standard interviewing technique, the aim is to avoid what Bourdieu sees as the misleading ‘neutrality’ of a structured questionnaire or

survey which reinforces, rather than softens, the power differential between interviewer and respondent.

By contrast, Bourdieu was prepared to intervene to prevent the inclusion in the book of interviews where the relationship between interviewer and interviewee became too comfortable (1999: 616-7). In one specific example which he discusses in the final essay, an interview with a woman who interpreted her educational problems as a narrative of displaced identity was rejected because such self-narrativising ‘excludes de facto any investigation of the objective facts of [the interviewee’s] trajectory’.

While purely self-referential interviews are certainly unhelpful, the obvious question is who determines in advance what the ‘objective facts’ of the interviewee’s situation are, and on what criteria? Bourdieu’s own cautionary comment (1999: 63-64) on the interview with Francois and Ali and its status as identity performance - that ‘it would be far more naïve to reject this possible truth’ (added emphasis) than to accept it at face value, because of its potential insights into a certain sort of self-despair, born of lack of symbolic resources - is relevant here.

More broadly, we have to ask whether, in the preselection of interviewees, the conducting of specific interviews, the selection of completed interviews for the book, and the interpretation of interviews within it, Bourdieu and his team ended up simply confirming the presumption of social suffering from which the whole research project started. This is an obvious line of attack and indeed one which Bourdieu himself acknowledges when he speaks of the project as ‘invoking’ from the subjects ‘as the research invites them to do “what is wrong” with their lives’ (1999: 615, added emphasis). More worrying than occasional steers in the interviews’ published text is

preselection during interviewee recruitment, since it cannot retrospectively be monitored. A response to this charge (if not a complete one) is to draw on the political justification for the book's subject-matter (noted at the beginning of this article), arguing that it is a counter-weight to sociological and media narratives that give insufficient attention, for example, to the unemployed's 'omnipresent fear of hitting rock-bottom' (1999: 371), or the profound isolation of many sick and elderly people (1999: 600), or the anger of the socially and economically disadvantaged when they feel misrepresented in their rare opportunities to be heard in the media (1999: 103-5).

There remains, however, another problem in how Bourdieu understands social suffering. A striking absence from the book discussed more in the next section is any sense of the everyday pleasures of those interviewed, in social interaction or leisure activities and particularly in media and cultural consumption. Were these topics excluded in advance from the interview protocols, and if so why, given that Bourdieu was all too aware that 'nothing is simpler, more "natural", than imposing a problematic' in interview research (1999: 619)? Since media consumption is one obvious common topic to 'break the ice' in an interview situation, are we to assume that an effort was made to avoid any such discussions or instead to edit those that occurred out of the finished text?

It is important to remember at this point just how much editing lies behind the final selection of voices presented in the book.⁸ In the book's final essay 'Understanding', Bourdieu acknowledges the value of William Labov's method for investigating speech patterns by using people from the same linguistic group to do the recording (1999: 611); are, he suggests, interviews with people about their living conditions

better done by those without formal sociological training (1999: 611), as in Paul Radin's 1930s work?⁹ Indeed this was Bourdieu's original plan: his small team of trained sociologists were to rely on a large army of untrained interviewers or mediators who would conduct the bulk of the interviews, but as he explains a significant proportion of those 'lay' interviewers' work was excluded from the published research because of over-identifications between interviewer and interviewee, which 'produced little more than sociolinguistic data, incapable of providing the means for their own interpretation' (1999: 611-12). In the English edition, of 42 interviews (some of them joint interviews), 25 were conducted by Bourdieu and his core sociologist team¹⁰ or by long-term collaborators of Bourdieu (Champagne, Wacquant, Bourgois). What we cannot know, of course, is how that excluded 'sociolinguistic data' might have changed the book's depiction of social suffering.

The Weight of the World: Some Strategic Absences

It is time to look at the broader methodological and theoretical judgements that stand behind the text of *The Weight of the World*. Paul Rabinow has depicted Bourdieu's method as tragically contradictory, and therefore flawed:

Against the grain of his own system, Bourdieu sympathises, does find the pervasive reproduction of social inequalities . . . both fascinating and intolerable, he does respect his subjects . . . However, he "knows" better and therefore must engage in the constant battle to overcome these sentiments, so as to become . . . indifferent. Hence, his (unrecognized) pathos. (Rabinow, 1996: 13)

Although 'indifference' in a sense derived from Epicurean philosophy is a term Bourdieu himself uses (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 115-117; cf Bourdieu, 1999:

614), Rabinow's claim both overdramatises and oversimplifies Bourdieu's position. While the issue of avoiding emotional identification is occasionally raised in *The Weight of the World* (for example 1999: 152, chapter by Loic Wacquant), in his preface Bourdieu talks of a balance between achieving objectivity and avoiding 'the objectivising distance that reduces the individual to a specimen in a display case'; analysis of interview material 'must adopt a perspective as close as possible to the individual's own without identifying with the *alter ego*' (1999: 2). 'Participant objectivation' (as Bourdieu calls this method)¹¹ involves getting close enough to the agent's point of view to reproduce it in all its taken-for-granted depth - as the point of view of a real agent speaking from a distinctive location in social space - but avoiding an emotional identification. While sharing Garfinkel's ethnomethodological concern with the taken-for-granted, Bourdieu rejects completely Garfinkel's (and indeed Goffman's and Schutz's) belief that close analysis of the interaction situation is sufficient unto itself; *a fortiori* emotions generated by the interaction must be excluded. Bourdieu is offering more than a knee-jerk insistence on 'objective' scientific rigour (a claim he mocks elsewhere in relation to supposedly neutral survey research); his point is that emotion generated by the interview situation is misplaced. As Bourdieu argued on many occasions, romanticising the local encounter involves 'the interactionist error' (1990b: 167; cf 2000: 146-147, 174) of ignoring that the space of social encounters is already distorted in advance by wider forces.

The problem, then, is not Bourdieu's striving for emotional distance (as Rabinow claims), but rather the type of theory Bourdieu brings to the interpretation of the interviews. As noted briefly in the last section, a fundamental weakness in the book's theoretical universe, not just its methodological practice, is its downplaying, to the

point, almost, of silence, of media and popular culture's role in interviewees' lives; the contrast, for example, with Carl Nightingale's work on inner city US black communities (1993), is striking. This drastic selectivity on the part of Bourdieu and his team is never explained or justified and applies even in the book's substantial section on the US inner cities. *The Weight of the World* is simply blind to the possibility that media and cultural consumption (fashion, cars, clothes, leisure) might work as a common resource linking local experiences. Where media do figure, this is, as already noted, in the analysis of the disruptive effects of media representations on those who lack cultural capital (1999: 46-59, cf 104-105, 213), but this cannot be the whole story. This argument against Bourdieu is not based on a populist view of cultural consumption. For what is important in Carl Nightingale's argument is precisely his insistence on the disarticulation between shared material aspirations sustained by media and cultural consumption and the actual and continuing inequality in resources and life chances from which poor inner city black populations in the US suffer. It is this, he argues, that is intolerable, and reinforces exclusion on a deeper level. Given Bourdieu's interest in analysing 'durable inequality' (Tilly, 1999), he would surely have wanted to take such issues of alienation seriously; indeed they are mentioned in passing (Champagne, at 1999: 59, 110; Bourdieu and Champagne, at 1999: 425-6). But by bracketing out the everyday landscape of media and cultural consumption that people inhabit, and its possible pleasures, as well as its frustrations, the book's analysis of social suffering is significantly weakened.

What can explain this strange absence? Bourdieu's often-criticised distance from popular culture can hardly be sufficient, given the seriousness of Bourdieu's attempt here to engage with the texture of everyday lives. More relevant is his explicit aim,

through the interviews, of allowing interviewees some distance from the oppressive burden, as he sees it, of the media's 'common sense' view of the world (1999: 620). Yet, while it would certainly be a distortion to assume that media are the central focus of everyday experience,¹² it is equally misleading to assume there is no substance to the mechanisms media and popular culture offer for coping with everyday 'suffering' (cf Walkerdine, 1999). Media and popular culture (television, film, music, magazines, sport) are surely more than a simple pain-killer without cognitive consequences. Bourdieu here falls foul of one of his own most powerful criticisms of mainstream sociology and anthropology: ignoring the consequences of the analyst's preexisting, socially produced, distance from the interviewee (Bourdieu, 1977: 1-2). This difference, as Bourdieu himself makes clear, is not one of emotion, but of interest; the analyst's distanced interest in the interviewees' life is a privilege based in what Bourdieu elsewhere calls 'that logical and political scandal, the monopolization of the universal' (2000: 84); yet the consumption of media and popular culture cannot be understood without considering its role in the contestation (by no means necessarily successful, let alone universal) of such monopolization. No shared emotion, or indeed suppression of emotion, could change the reality of the sociologist interviewer's privileged distance (hence Rabinow's critique is misplaced). What would have been valuable, however, is more theoretical reflection on Bourdieu's part concerning the consequences of his own distance from media and popular culture for his ability to depict convincingly contemporary experiences of social suffering.

What of the wider aims of Bourdieu's sociology in *The Weight of the World*?

Bourdieu's methodology – its particular focus and ambition – only makes sense in the light of his belief that sociology, and preeminently sociology, can illuminate the

‘essential principle of what is lived and seen *on the ground*’ (1999: 123). But what ‘ground’ are we discussing? Given that (as we have seen) Bourdieu is prepared to use his sociological judgement to override an individual voice, we need to look closely at the criteria that drive the book’s interpretative decisions. In discussing a provincial wine dealer, close to retirement after a working life of declining success, Patrick Champagne comments:

If there was nothing to surprise me in these aggressive observations, which I had heard many times over without really understanding them, *I was still astonished* at just how sociologically coherent those observations are once they are connected to the social position of the person making them (a move not made in ordinary conversation or done only to counter-attack). (in Bourdieu, 1999: 392-93, added emphasis)

Or, as Bourdieu himself puts it (1999: 391), when interpreting a farmer’s talk about his son’s failure to take on the family farm as a masked statement that the son had killed the father, ‘it was only after having constructed the explanatory model – simultaneously unique and generic’ that such an interpretation became possible. These admissions of difficulty, while refreshingly honest, raise a problem. It is not obvious how a ‘model’ (explaining what someone in this farmer’s structural position might mean to say about his son) can reveal what this particular farmer actually meant to say on that particular occasion. This gap, Bourdieu insists, cannot be filled with psychoanalysis (1999: 513, 620-621), but, if so, how is it to be filled? Bourdieu appears to rely on a theory of how to understand what is unsaid, an implicit theory of repression (1999: 615), that surely needs more discussion (cf Billig, 1997). The theory of ‘habitus’ – as the general principle that determines the range of practices available to an individual – hardly seems sufficient to explain the dynamics of individual

narratives, and their specific repressions and absences. There remains, then, at the end of the book, a gap between the ‘partial and temporary truths’ of the interview method (1999: 629) and Bourdieu’s wider sociological framework.

Perhaps such a gap is in principle insoluble. Perhaps the resulting uncertainty is inherent in all serious fieldwork, as George Marcus (1999) has recently argued, although it is unclear whether Bourdieu would have endorsed Marcus’ epistemological scepticism. I suspect that Bourdieu was well aware of the gap between the ‘evidence’ of the book’s interviews and his bigger social theory, and wanted to confront it. It is a mistake to see this, crudely, as a failing deriving from the tension between habitus and lived situation throughout social theory (Martuccelli, 1999: 141), because it is precisely such tensions which the book’s final essay appears deliberately to heighten. If so, the book’s uncertainties, unresolved tensions and strategic absences must be accepted for what they are, inviting one final question: notwithstanding them, does *The Weight of the World* yield an enriched understanding of the conditions under which contemporary individuals act and speak?

Conclusion

This article has answered that question by arguing that *The Weight of the World* is indeed successful in such terms. It is the book’s very particular combination of empirical engagement, methodological reflexivity and theoretical commitment (commitment, that is, to maintaining some notion of social structure operating within the details of local experience) that allows us to explore the tensions on which this article has focussed. In this way, the book takes us, I would suggest, further than either the general theory of Giddens and Luhmann or the empirical investigations of

‘de-socialisation’ within Touraine’s school. At the same time, we cannot be satisfied with the flaws in Bourdieu’s approach that this article has identified. Since my most fundamental criticism of *The Weight of the World* has been its inattention to media and popular culture’s role in everyday experience, I want to conclude by arguing, briefly, for the value of Bourdieu’s theoretical framework (if applied in a more open fashion) in addressing precisely that aspect of contemporary cultures.¹³

We live, arguably, in an age where two things are happening simultaneously: both the dispersal of some forms of social and cultural authority and the intense concentration of forces of media and cultural production through which certain other social rhetorics can be channelled. If so, there is value in examining the categorising power (in Durkheim’s sense) of media institutions in everyday life, for example the intensely negotiated categories such as ‘reality’, ‘liveness’, ‘celebrity’ and so on. These categories are interesting not because they are fashionable, but because of their combined role as both social and cognitive distinctions, precisely the dual usage which Bourdieu saw as distinctive of symbolic systems (Swartz, 1997: 87-88) and as so important to the interpretation of individual narratives.

It would have been interesting, for example, if Bourdieu’s interviewees had been asked to reflect on their view of today’s mediated public spaces (the talk show, for example) as places from which to represent themselves; the marking of such spaces by class differentials is so important that they are, arguably, an ideal site for symbolic analysis in the spirit of Bourdieu (Grindstaff, 2002; Couldry, 2003a, chapter 7). We could move from the analysis of certain key social classifications in media and popular culture to reexamine how ‘habitus’, the foundational term in Bourdieu’s work

that links structure and agency, should be rethought for an age when virtually every living-space has its own electronic window onto the world?¹⁴ We could broaden our analysis to rethink the sociological implications of the constraints under which in mediated societies individual narratives of the social world get produced, exactly the type of issue that was characteristic of Bourdieu's sociology as a whole; from there, we could gain a sense of how this constructed 'world' of media representations is involved in subtly constraining the imagined space of action of specific individuals.

Paradoxically, given Bourdieu's stated hostility to 'cultural studies' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1999), the result of developing Bourdieu's concerns with habitus would be something akin to the aim set by Elspeth Probyn for cultural studies itself: the aim of 'thinking the social through' the self (1993: 3, added emphasis). There is more at stake here, in other words, than the continuation of one sociologist's legacy. The issue is how best to develop, in an inter-disciplinary spirit, the theoretical basis for critical commentary on both the commonalities and the divisions of contemporary cultures.

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¹ I discuss this at greater length in Couldry (2000: chapter 3).

² Quoted, Bourdieu (1999: 93).

³ See Bourdieu (2002).

⁴ This analysis is picked up also at various points in the *Pascalian Meditations* (2000).

⁵ See respectively Elliott, 1996 and Bauman, 1992.

⁶ See Young (1999: chapter 3) for valuable discussion.

⁷ He is surely right, although hardly pathbreaking, to draw back from treating the interviews as 'truths' about those who speak (1999: 63, 240, 536). This has been a consistent theme for example of anthropology and feminist sociology for two decades or so (see for example Scott, 1992; Gray, 1997).

⁸ Note that not all the interviews published in the original French edition were included in the English translation.

⁹ Discussed in Gupta and Ferguson (1997: 23).

¹⁰ Christin, Delaut, Pialoux, Sayad (see 1999: 611).

¹¹ This translation, previously adopted in other Bourdieu translations, seems, perhaps even because of its initial awkwardness, preferable to 'participant objectification' introduced by the recent translators of *The Weight of the World*.

¹² I have argued against the prevalence of this assumption in media studies (Couldry, 2003a).

¹³ Clearly to develop this point fully would require at least one article by itself. For part of such an argument, see Couldry (2003b).

¹⁴ For the continued relevance of Bourdieu's notion of embodied 'habitus', compared with Foucault's discourse-based analysis, see McNay (1999).