

Gender, Habitus and the Field

Pierre Bourdieu and the Limits of Reflexivity

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Introduction

THIS ARTICLE ARGUES that the failure of certain theories of reflexive identity transformation to consider more fully issues connected to gender identity leads to an overemphasis on the expressive possibilities thrown up by processes of detraditionalization. A more sustained examination of questions related to gender, embodiment and sexuality reveals aspects of identity that render it less amenable to emancipatory processes of refashioning. This is not to say that identity is immutable but, by ignoring certain deeply embedded aspects, some theories of reflexive change reproduce the 'disembodied and disembedded' subject of masculinist thought.

The issues of disembodiment and disembeddedness are explored through a study of the work of Pierre Bourdieu on 'habitus' and the 'field' and this is contrasted briefly with Michel Foucault's work on the body and the self. Foucault's work is a central source for both theories of reflexive identity and feminist work on gender, I argue, however, that in two key respects, Bourdieu's work on the incorporation of the social into the body is more developed. First, Bourdieu's notion of habitus yields a more dynamic theory of embodiment than Foucault's work which fails to think the materiality of the body and thus vacillates between determinism and voluntarism. A dynamic and non-dichotomous notion of embodiment is central to a feminist understanding of gender identity as a durable but not immutable norm. Second, Bourdieu's notion of the 'field' provides a more differentiated analysis of the social context in which the reflexive transformation of identity unfolds. Such a differentiated analysis is foreclosed in theories that construe reflexivity as primarily a result of processes of

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‘aesthetic dedifferentiation’. A weakness of Bourdieu’s work on the gendered habitus is that he fails to fully integrate it with his work on the concept of the field. However, by drawing out these implications, I show how the field permits the conceptualization of differentiation within the construction of gender identity. This in turn offers a way of thinking of possible transformations within gender identity as uneven and non-synchronous phenomena.

Foucault and the Materiality of the Body

Michel Foucault’s work on the construction and regulation of the subject has had an enormous impact on recent theories of identity. Two areas upon which his thought has had a significant influence are feminist theories of gender and also certain theories of reflexivity that emphasize the potential, thrown up by changes in late capitalism, for the transformation of social identities (e.g. Butler, 1990, 1993; Featherstone, 1992: 269; Giddens, 1992: 18–37). It is the extent to which Foucault draws attention to the constructed, socially contingent and hence mutable elements of identity that makes his work a central source for such recent thought. Foucault’s work on discipline shows how the body is not a natural entity but is socially produced through regimes of knowledge and power (*dispositif*). His later work shifts focus from ‘technologies of domination’ to ‘technologies of the self’ and claims that identity is not simply imposed from above but is also actively determined by individuals through the deployment of ‘practices’ of the self. When this process of self-stylization becomes conscious, then the potential for a reflexive or ethical form of self-fashioning – an ‘aesthetics of existence’ – emerges (Foucault, 1985). Self-stylization is an example of what Foucault calls the practice of liberty.

Despite its impact upon subsequent thought on the issue of subjectification, there are certain difficulties in Foucault’s thinking of the nature of embodied identity which stem from his failure to integrate fully the insights from his work on biopower with his subsequent thought on practices of the self. This results in an unresolved vacillation between determinism, on the one hand, and voluntarism, on the other. From ‘Nietzsche, Genealogy, History’ through to the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, it is the docile body which is inexorably worked upon by differing disciplinary regimes. The idea of discipline replaces dichotomized understandings of corporeal repression and liberation – evident in Marcuse’s work for example – with a more complex notion of networks of control that are simultaneously constitutive of pleasure. The very means through which individuals are controlled also provide the foundation for autonomous action. In other words, resistance emerges from within the social and not from some extra-social or unconscious source. This insight into the capacity of dominatory relations to fold back upon themselves creating spaces of autonomy is undercut by Foucault’s failure to think through the materiality of the body. There is a tendency to conceive of the body as essentially a passive, blank surface upon which power relations are inscribed. As a result, a form

of uni-directional determinism emerges which leads to an understanding of the acquisition of gender identity as a relatively straightforward and one-sided process of inculcation and normalization (McNay, 1994: 100–4).

The tendency to hyperdeterminism that marks Foucault's work on discipline arises in part because the process of corporeal construction is considered in isolation from a notion of agency. Subjectivity tends to be regarded as an effect or 'present correlative' of regimes of disciplinary control over the body (Foucault, 1977: 29). This lack of a more substantive theory of agency undermines the idea of resistance because there is no active subject through which it may be realized. Foucault's work on practices of the self corrects this imbalance by showing how the process of subjectification involves not only bodily subjection but also a relatively autonomous form of self-construction (Foucault, 1982). However, although the concept of the 'docile body' is replaced with the more productive notion of the 'reflexive' subject, the materiality of the body remains unthought in so far as it is conceived as the non-problematic backdrop to practices of the self. The impression is given that identity, particularly sexual identity, is fully amenable to a process of self-stylization. This failure to consider fully the recalcitrance of embodied existence to self-fashioning manifests itself, for example, in the emphasis on aesthetics of the self as a form of ascesis or self-mastery which fails to consider the exclusionary implications of such a masculine model of self-control for female subjects (McNay, 1992). More generally, the ways in which the preconscious and unknowable elements of incorporated experience – suggested in Kristeva's notion of abjection or Grosz's notion of volatility – might block an ethics of the self are not taken into account (see Grosz, 1994a: 193–4; Kristeva, 1980).

This neglect to distinguish more adequately between aspects of subjectivity that are relatively amenable to self-fashioning and those that are more ineluctable arises partly from Foucault's rejection of the psychoanalytic concept of repression and associated notions of the unconscious, drives and desires. Foucault's reformulation of power as emerging within productive social relations rather than as a repressive, psychic energy undoubtedly has much force but it leaves him, in a sense, with a flattened out view of the subject where the question of how it is possible to refashion more deeply inscribed elements of the self – such as sexual desire – is not adequately addressed. In so far as it underestimates the embodied aspects of existence Foucault's final work bears traces of an abstract voluntarism which reformulates rather than breaks from a philosophy of consciousness.

This unresolved tension in Foucault's work between determinist and voluntarist tendencies is reproduced in varying ways in the work of those influenced by his thought. Giddens's work on reflexivity and the transformation of intimacy, for example, is characterized by a relative lack of concern for the issue of embodiment (Turner, 1991: 11). While he is careful to temper his discussion of the transformatory potential of reflexive self-management with an emphasis on a reactive ontological anxiety, Giddens's consideration of identity emphasizes existential aspects rather

than corporeal foundations. His discussion of sexuality in *The Transformation of Intimacy* is construed largely in terms of the 'sequestration of experience' and its implications of affectual and moral anomie. While Giddens is rightly critical of Foucault's reduction of the issue of sexuality to the notion of biopower, he also does not examine the deeply entrenched bodily basis of sexual identity. The failure to fully consider sexuality as embedded in inculcated, bodily predisposition underestimates the relatively involuntary, pre-reflexive and entrenched elements in identity. Without having to resort to biologistic notions of maternal instinct, the inscription of the mothering role upon the female body is fundamental in the inculcation of emotional and physical predispositions that maintain gender inequality around child-rearing. It is not clear how such forms of identity, which are overdetermined both physically and emotionally, can be that easily dislodged (Soper, 1990: 60). It is in the light of such concerns that Giddens's claim that 'revolutionary processes are already under way in the infrastructure of personal life' seem to require much qualification (Giddens, 1992: 182). In sum, there is a tendency in certain theories of identity transformation to construe identity as a process of symbolic identification without considering its mediation in embodied practice (e.g. Featherstone, 1992). From this shortcoming, a tendency to voluntarism can arise which manifests itself in an overemphasis on the emancipatory expressive possibilities thrown up in late capitalism.

Embodiment and Habitus

The concept of embodiment is central to feminist thought, because it mediates the antinomic moments of determinism and voluntarism through the positing of a mutual inherence or univocity of mind and body in place of a Cartesian dualism. As the point of overlap between the physical, the symbolic and the sociological, the body is a dynamic, mutable frontier. The body is the threshold through which the subject's lived experience of the world is incorporated and realized and, as such, is neither pure object nor pure subject. It is neither pure object since it is the place of one's engagement with the world. Nor is it pure subject in that there is always a material residue that resists incorporation into dominant symbolic schema. In Elizabeth Grosz's words (1994a), the body is a 'transitional entity'. A lack of corporeal finality arises from a mutual inherence between psychical interior and corporeal exterior where each is constitutive but not reducible to the other. Such a lack of finality suggests, for example, that the ascription of feminine corporeal identity is never straightforward or complete. A similar idea is expressed in Judith Butler's concept of performativity (1990, 1993). As a constantly reiterated cultural norm gender is deeply inscribed upon our bodies. At the same time, the cultural necessity for a performative reiteration points to a constitutive instability in gendered identity. It is this instability that can be prised open to create a space for the construction of marginal or 'abject' sexualities.

The idea of a dynamic and non-dichotomous inherence between the

body and subjectivity is important for feminist theory because it allows a recognition of the central but not invariant role played by sexuality in women's incorporated experience of the world. A fluid relation to gendered identity is implied where gender is understood as an entrenched but not unsurpassable boundary. Embodiment expresses a moment of indeterminacy whereby the embodied subject is constituted through dominant norms but is not reducible to them. There are, however, certain difficulties in the thinking through of a dynamic notion of embodiment. Butler, for example, attempts to formulate the open-ended nature of the formation of gender identity through emphasis on the fragility of dominant norms. This insight is undercut by the drift in her work towards reducing the process of subjectification to one of subjection. This engenders a dualistic logic of inclusion–exclusion, domination–resistance which, ultimately, replicates the hyperstatization of the dominant and the fetishization of the marginal that haunts much of Foucault's work (McNay, 1994: 80–2).

In the light of the difficulties that hamper the conceptualization of embodied existence, Pierre Bourdieu's work on *habitus* and *le sens pratique* has important implications for feminist theories of gender identity. In a fashion similar to Foucault, Bourdieu claims that large-scale social inequalities are established not at the level of direct institutional discrimination but through the subtle inculcation of power relations upon the bodies and dispositions of individuals. This process of corporeal inculcation is an instance of what Bourdieu calls *symbolic violence* or a form of domination which is 'exercised upon a social agent with his or her complicity' (1992: 167). The incorporation of the social into the corporeal is captured by Bourdieu in the notion of *habitus*, a system of durable, transposable dispositions that mediates an individual's actions and the external conditions of production (1990a: 53). An institution can only be efficacious if it is objectified in bodies in the form of durable dispositions that recognize and comply with the specific demands of a given institutional area of activity, 'the *habitus* is what enables the institution to attain full realization' (1990a: 57).

In the article 'La Domination masculine' (1990b), Bourdieu looks at what he considers to be the paradigm of symbolic domination, namely gender inequality (1992: 170). Drawing on his research into the North African society of Kabyle, Bourdieu shows how masculine domination assumes a natural, self-evident status through its inscription in the objective structure of the social world which is then incorporated and reproduced in the *habitus* of individuals. The key to the naturalization of the masculine–feminine opposition is its insertion in a series of analogous oppositions – a 'mythico-ritual' system – which occludes the arbitrary nature of the sexual division by lending it a 'semantic' thickness or an overdetermination of connotations and correspondences. These binaries are lived and reinvoked in the everyday life of the Kabyle and are particularly evident in the structuring of the social space which confines women, by and large, to circumscribed domestic, pastoral and market locations as opposed to the masculine sites of the public sphere.

The inscription of a system of sexualized oppositions upon social space is paralleled in the ‘somatization’ of these relations within the bodies of individuals. Hierarchical gender relations are embedded in bodily *hexis*, that is to say arbitrary power relations are inculcated upon the body in the naturalized form of gender identity. The living through of bodily *hexis* leads to doxic forms of perception which permit the ‘re-engenderization’ of all perceived social differences, that is their interpretation in a sexualized dualism. Thus women become implicated within a circular logic where the cultural arbitrary is imposed upon the body in a naturalized form whose cognitive effects (doxa) result in the further naturalization of arbitrary social differences. Women in Kabyle society realize in their conduct the negative identity that has been socially imposed upon them and in doing so naturalize this identity (1990b: 10). Although Kabyle is a peasant culture, Bourdieu claims it exemplifies the ways in which sexual hierarchies are maintained in modern industrial society. This claim will be examined in subsequent sections.

Le Sens Pratique and Gender

At first sight, the idea of embodiment expressed in the notion of habitus appears not to be a dynamic, open-ended process but rather one of inexorable physical control not dissimilar to the Foucauldian notion of discipline. Indeed, the charge of determinism is a common criticism of Bourdieu’s work (e.g. Alexander, 1994: 136; Garnham and Williams, 1980: 222). These criticisms fail to recognize, however, the force of Bourdieu’s insistence that habitus is not to be conceived as a principle of determination but as a *generative* structure. Within certain objective limits (the *field*), it engenders a potentially infinite number of patterns of behaviour, thought and expression that are both ‘relatively unpredictable’ but also ‘limited in their diversity’. Thus, habitus gives practice a relative autonomy with respect to the external determinations of the immediate present but at the same time ensures that it is objectively adapted to its outcomes (1990a: 55).

The generative nature of the habitus is explained by what Bourdieu calls a ‘double and obscure’ relation between individual habitus and the social circumstances or ‘field’ from which it emerges. On one side, there is a relation of conditioning where the objective conditions of a given field structure the habitus. On the other, there is a relation of ‘cognitive construction’ whereby habitus is constitutive of the field in that it endows the latter with meaning, with ‘sense and value’, in which it is worth investing one’s energy (1992: 127). In so far as meaningful social action is what Crespi (1989) calls a ‘borderline concept’ – that is, it is neither fully determined nor fully willed – the habitus is a generative rather than determining structure which establishes an active and creative relation – ‘*ars inveniendi*’ (1992: 122) – between the subject and the world.

Habitus is realized in ‘le sens pratique’ (feel for the game) a pre-reflexive level of practical mastery (1990a: 52). It is a mode of knowledge that does not necessarily contain knowledge of its own principles (‘*docta*

ignoratia) and is constitutive of reasonable but not rational behaviour: 'It is because agents never know completely what they are doing that what they do has more sense than they know' (1990a: 69). The example that Bourdieu frequently uses to explain the concept is of the tennis player whose strokes assume a spontaneous and relatively unpredictable form in a match although they are consciously and mechanically practised. 'Le sens pratique' is a form of knowledge that is learnt by the body but cannot be explicitly articulated.

To explain gender identity in terms of this notion of 'practical belief' is to suggest that it amounts to something more than the internalization of an external set of representations by a subject. The acquisition of gender identity does not pass through consciousness, it is not memorized but enacted at a pre-reflexive level. At the same time, bodily dispositions are not simply mechanically learned but lived as a form of 'practical mimesis': 'the body believes in what it plays at: it weeps if it mimes grief' (1990a: 73). In his critique of the concept of ideology, Foucault also draws attention to the way in which disciplinary power does not pass through consciousness (Foucault, 1980: 186). However, by not providing a more active notion of the acting subject, the idea of discipline is in danger of becoming a technical principle of bodily constraint. While psychoanalysis provides a more nuanced account of the ambivalences that surround the acquisition of gender identity, Bourdieu is critical of the way in which its archetypal psycho-sexual categories cannot account for the myriad of other social power relations – 'the countless acts of diffuse inculcation through which the body and the world tend to be set in order' – that overlay and run counter to sexual division (1990a: 78). By stressing that habitus and 'le sens pratique' are essentially lived categories, theoretical space is opened for explaining the elements of variability and potential creativity immanent to even the most routine reproduction of gender identity.

Foucault and Bourdieu on the Body

Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and 'le sens pratique' establish major differences with Foucault's work on the body. First, in contrast with the atemporality of the Foucauldian *tabula rasa*, the concept of habitus introduces a temporal dimension to an understanding of the body. An understanding of embodiment as inseparable from social practice leads Bourdieu to speak of social agents rather than subjects (1992: 137). Praxis, or the living through of the embodied potentialities of the habitus, is a temporal activity. Time is understood in radically historicist terms as engendered through social being. Practice is the result of a habitus that is itself the incorporation of temporal structures or the regularities and tendencies of the world into the body. Embodied practice is necessarily temporal in that it both expresses and anticipates these tendencies and regularities. Practice, therefore, generates time: 'time is engendered in the actualization of the act' (1992: 138). By conceiving of habitus as a temporal structure, the body is imputed a dynamism and mutability.

A notion of temporality is missing in many accounts of gender, where it tends to be construed as a relatively atemporal system of dominant norms. Butler draws attention to the constitutive instability of dominant norms, however, as we have seen, this does not lead to a less monolithic concept of normative gender identity. This problem is related partly to her failure to think of time as 'protention' as well as 'retention'. Butler briefly acknowledges the presence of a potentially disruptive temporality at the heart of the most regulatory norms, but her notion of performativity relies predominantly on a version of the Freudian idea of repetition compulsion which is essentially a reactive and, according to some commentators, an atemporal concept (see Smith, 1996). This emphasis on the retrospective dimensions of time – the performative as 'a repetition, a sedimentation, a congealment of the past' (Butler, 1993: 244) – leads to an overemphasis on the internal uniformity of gender norms. Reiteration becomes a static rather than temporal act where the reproduction of the sex-gender system involves a ceaseless reinscription of the same. This notion of time as a succession of self-identical and discrete acts renders the dominant hermetic and self-sustaining and means that disruption can only come from outside. This provokes the dualisms of subjection–resistance, exclusion–inclusion that limit Butler's work. Following Husserl, Bourdieu invokes a more praxeological notion of temporality as protention – time as involving a 'practical reference to the future' – and thereby opens up the act of reproduction to indeterminacy and the potential for change (1992: 129). For example, the idea of a detraditionalization of gender norms cannot be accounted for in Butler's static model of domination because it does not allow a notion of decomposition from within. A more active notion of praxis is required where social being is regarded not just as repetition, but as a creative anticipation of future uncertainty on the part of social actors. In sum, Bourdieu's work reminds us that it is essential that the 'sex-gender system' be conceived of as temporal and open-ended if change to dominant norms is to be conceived in terms other than total rupture.

While the praxeological notion of time embedded in the concept of habitus highlights the uncertainties inherent in even the most routine act of reproduction, it also underscores the entrenched nature of normative social identity. The idea of a corporeal, pre-reflexive foundation to agency establishes a second area of difference with Foucault's work in that it provides a corrective to the voluntarist emphasis that hampers the idea of practices of the self. Habitus suggests a layer of embodied experience that is not immediately amenable to self-fashioning. On a pre-reflexive level, the actor is predisposed or oriented to behave in a certain way because of the 'active presence' of the whole past embedded in the durable structures of the habitus. By gesturing towards potentially unrecuperable elements of embodied experience, Bourdieu shares with psychoanalysis a stress on the priority of originary experiences which lead to a *relative* closure of systems of disposition that constitute habitus (1992: 134). A difficulty for a feminist appropriation of psychoanalytic theory is that this closure tends to be

immutable in so far as the symbolic realm is understood in psychic rather than socio-historical terms, hence the problematic construal of femininity as an invariable negativity. In Bourdieu's model, although the habitus accords a disproportionate weight to primary social experiences, the resulting closure is never absolute because the habitus is an historical structure that is only ever realized in reference to specific situations. Thus while an agent might be predisposed to act in certain ways, the potentiality for innovation or creative action is never foreclosed: '[habitus] is an *open* system of dispositions that is constantly subjected to experiences, and therefore constantly affected by them in a way that either reinforces or *modifies* its structures' (Bourdieu, 1992: 133; my italics).

The pre-reflexive mode of habitus provides a more differentiated or layered account of the entrenched dimensions of embodied experiences that might escape processes of reflexive self-monitoring. Thus, detraditionalizing forces may have thrown certain aspects of gender relations – the gender division of labour, marriage – up for renegotiation. At the same time, however, men and women have deep-seated, often unconscious investments in conventional images of masculinity and femininity which cannot easily be reshaped and throw into doubt ideas of the transformation of intimacy. The destabilizing of conventional gender relations on one level, may further entrench conventional patterns of behaviour on other levels. For example, women's entry into the workforce has not freed women demonstrably from the burden of emotional responsibilities. Rather, it has made the process of female individualization more complex in that the notion of 'living one's own life' is in a conflictual relation with the conventional expectation of 'being there for others' (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995: 22). In a similar vein, work on the sociology of emotions suggests that despite modernizing forces, gender differences in emotional behaviour are deeply entrenched (Duncombe and Marsden, 1993).

The uneven nature of the transformation of gender relations illustrates Bourdieu's claim that the habitus continues to work long after the objective conditions of its emergence have been dislodged (1990b: 13). A weakness of alternative theories of reflexive transformation is that the emphasis on strategic and conscious processes of self-monitoring overlook certain more enduring, reactive aspects of identity. Other theories of reflexive transformation place much weight on 'biographically significant life choices' while ignoring the 'unconsidered and automatic, habitual routine of conduct' (Campbell, 1996: 163). As Bourdieu points out, 'determinisms operate to their full only by the help of unconsciousness' (1992: 136). While gender identity is not an immutable or essential horizon, there are many pre-reflexive aspects of masculine and feminine behaviour – sexual desire, maternal feelings – that call into question the process of identity transformation highlighted by some theories of reflexivity. This is a result of the deeply entrenched nature of gender identity and also of the way in which gender as a primary symbolic distinction is used to play out other social tensions. As Bourdieu shows in *Distinction*, anxieties about class status and

belonging are sublimated into and played out through the categories of masculinity and femininity thereby entrenching them further (1979: 382).

The third set of differences between Bourdieu's notion of habitus and the Foucauldian concept of the body centre around an understanding of agency in terms of a dialectic of freedom and constraint which emerges from a temporalized concept of the body. The somatization of power relations involves the imposition of limits upon the body which simultaneously constitute the condition of possibility of agency. Agency is an act of temporalization where the subject transcends the present through actions that have an inherently anticipatory structure. The practical activity of the agent transcends the immediacy of the present through the 'mobilization of the past and practical anticipation of the future inscribed in the present in a state of objective potentiality' (1992: 138). The intertwinement of corporeal being and agency implied in the concept of habitus transcends the opposition between freedom and constraint characteristic, for example, of liberal conceptions of the subject. Foucault (1982: 221) also argues against an understanding of the subject in terms of an antinomy of freedom and constraint, however, the vacillation of his thought between determinism and voluntarism prevents him from developing this insight. The formation of subjectivity within a symbolic system involves subjection to dominant power relations, but also involves the institution of meaning. The instantiation of a subject within dominatory power relations does not negate but rather implies agency:

I do not see how relations of domination ... could possibly operate without implying, activating resistance. *The dominated, in any social universe, can always exert a certain force*, inasmuch as belonging to a field means by definition that one is capable of producing effects in it. (Bourdieu, 1992: 80; original emphasis)

In this way the relation between symbolic structure and subject is shifted from an antinomy of domination–resistance and to a more differentiated concept of 'regulated liberties' (Bourdieu, 1991: 102).

The idea of 'regulated liberties' has important implications for a feminist understanding of the relation between women and dominant representations of femininity. It provides a way of obviating simplified theories of oppression and provides a framework in which to understand some of the 'hybrid' forms that women's autonomy has recently taken. The notion of hybridity – taken from postcolonial theory – suggests a form of change not as opposition or externality but as dislocation arising from the reinscription of the tools and symbols of the dominant into the space of the colonized (Bhabha, 1994: 109). Such a notion is useful for an understanding of what are perceived to be significant assertions of women's autonomy in the last 20 years which rest on an ambivalent relation with conventional notions and images of femininity. For example, the tentative renegotiation of heterosexual relations beyond the institution of marriage. Or, for example, the

claims made in studies of ‘girl culture’ that highly feminized cultural icons, notably Madonna, provide teenage girls with a set of symbolic tools with which to subvert patriarchal definitions of femininity (Kaplan, 1993). Or, the appropriation by ‘lipstick’ lesbians of the signifiers of conventional femininity to throw into question stereotyped representations of non-heterosexuals. Such changes cannot be understood through binaries of domination and resistance but rather involve more complex processes of investment and negotiation. They are illustrative of how the feminine subject is synchronically produced as the object of regulatory norms by phallocentric symbolic systems and formed as a subject or agent who may resist these norms. In this view, gender identity is not a mechanistically determining structure but an open system of dispositions – regulated liberties – that are ‘durable but not eternal’ (Bourdieu, 1992: 133).

Resistance and Change

Bourdieu’s notion of habitus permits the thinking of the synchronous nature of constraint and freedom expressed in the hybrid form that women’s social experience has assumed. At the same time, however, it guards against a conflation of the potentiality for autonomous action with a celebration of its subversive political significance. The fact that individuals do not straightforwardly reproduce the social system is not a guarantee of the inherently resistant nature of their actions. Bourdieu is critical of the tendency to ‘spontaneist populism’ that haunts certain forms of cultural studies (e.g. Fiske, 1989). He claims that practices often hailed as ‘resistant’ may have an impact only on the relatively superficial ‘effective’ relations of a field rather than its deeper structural relations (1992: 113). While avoiding this celebratory subjectivism in an explicit form, certain theories of identity transformation often reproduce it indirectly through a fetishization of the indeterminacy of social structures. An indeterminacy which forms the ontological grounds for the emergence of change becomes elided with the emancipatory or political *per se*. Resistance becomes an inevitable consequence of instability rather than a potentiality whose realization is contingent upon a certain configuration of power relations (McNay, 1996). This elision is evident in Butler’s work, for example, which moves too quickly from outlining the constitutive instability of symbolic systems to claiming a political status for certain ‘excentric’ sexual practices (Hennessy, 1992). This is not to deny the threat that homosexuality poses to heterosexuality but it does throw into question some of the wider political claims made about individualized sexual practices. It constitutes what Grosz calls, ‘a refusal to link sexual pleasure with the struggle for freedom, a refusal to validate sexuality in terms of a greater cause or a higher purpose’ (Grosz, 1994b: 153).

Scott Lash’s work also rests on short-circuited movement from the ontological to the political. He argues that ‘gender bending’ in adverts problematizes reality and the normative through the deliberate ambiguity in gender and sexual preference that is built into such images. The effect of

this symbolic problematization is an opening up of social identities to produce a 'more ambivalent and less fixed positioning of subjectivity' (1990: 198). The problem with such an argument is that it elides a process of symbolic destabilization with processes of social and political transformation. A consideration of gender shows that while there may have been a loosening of dominant images of femininity, the transformative impact of these images upon embodied feminine identity and upon the collective subordination of women in society is far from certain (e.g. Walby, 1992). By eliding symbolic detraditionalization with social detraditionalization, some theories of reflexive transformation overestimate the significance of the expressive possibilities available to men and women in late capitalist society.

In pointing towards the rootedness of gender divisions in social forms, the concepts of *habitus* and '*le sens pratique*' serve as a corrective to sociologically naive claims about the transformation of social and sexual identities. Bourdieu does not deny the possibility of reflexive self-awareness nor the attendant potential for politically motivated change. This possibility for change is immanent to the temporal and indeterminate nature of social praxis. It also arises from the increasingly differentiated nature of modern society into distinct fields of action. The field is defined as a network or configuration of objective relations between positions (1993: 72–7). The configuration receives its form from the relation between each position and the distribution of a certain type of capital. Capital – economic, social, cultural and symbolic – denotes the different goods, resources and values around which power relations in a particular field crystallize. Any field is marked by a tension or conflict between the interests of different groups who struggle to gain control over a field's capital. In the final instance, all fields are determined by the demands of the capitalist system of accumulation, however, each field is autonomous in that it has a specific internal logic which establishes non-synchronous, uneven relations with other fields and which renders it irreducible to any overarching dynamic. The proliferation of differentiated fields of action leads to a 'lengthening of circuits of legitimization' which has both positive and negative effects. In an argument similar to Foucault's critique of monarchical concepts of power, Bourdieu claims that when power is no longer incarnated in persons or specific institutions but becomes coextensive with a complex set of relations between different fields, social control becomes more insidious and hence more effective. At the same time, this increase in the efficacy of symbolic domination is counterbalanced by an increase in 'the potential for subversive misappropriation' arising from movement and conflict between fields of action (1989: 554–7).

Although Bourdieu acknowledges the destabilizing and potentially subversive effects that might arise from movement across fields, he fails to consider what this might imply for an understanding of modern gender identity. To put this in other terms, he fails to bring the conceptual implications of the idea of the field, most notably that of societal

differentiation, to bear on the idea of habitus. While habitus draws attention to the entrenched nature of gender identity, it is important to consider the extent to which its effects may be attenuated by the movement of individuals across fields. If the differentiation of society leads to what Luhmann (1986) calls an 'a priori displacement' of individuals, the lack of fit between gendered habitus and field may be intensified. Such a consideration is imperative in the light of the increased entry of women into traditionally non-feminine spheres of action and in the light of the putative opening up of alternative definitions of masculinity that some theorists have identified (e.g. Segal, 1990). In his studies of specific fields of action, Bourdieu alludes to possible dimensions of such changes. For example, in *La Noblesse d'état* (1989) he mentions the correlation between women's increased entry into higher education and declining levels of fertility but the broader implications for gender identity are not considered. More strikingly, in his only sustained consideration of gender identity, the concept of the field is not discussed (1989: 390–2). The origin of this oversight in Bourdieu's work lies in his extrapolation of the 'basic mythic structures' of sexuality from an analysis of Kabyle society. Despite the attenuation of a pure dualism of gender relations in a differentiated society, Bourdieu claims that these archaic mental structures still survive in contemporary practices and dispositions (1990b: 4). Contemporary masculinity is construed as the enactment of the *libido dominandi*, an unfaltering assertion of virility which pits men against each other in agonistic games of self-assertion. Masculine privilege is a trap in as much as: 'the dominant is dominated by his domination' (1992: 173). The principle of *isotimie* – equality in honour – that governs these games of masculine competition excludes the feminine entirely. This exclusion from the realm of masculine privilege accords women a certain critical insight – the 'lucidity of the excluded' – into masculinity. However, their subordinate position means that women remain complicit with these games and thus, participate by proxy (*par procuration*) in their own subordination and serve as 'flattering mirrors' to the games of men (1990b: 26).

This lack of a sustained consideration of gendered habitus in relation to the field results in an overemphasis on the alignment that the habitus establishes between subjective dispositions and the objective structure of the field with regard to gender identity. Although he is undoubtedly right to stress the ingrained nature of gender norms, he significantly underestimates the ambiguities and dissonances that exist in the way that men and women occupy masculine and feminine positions. The acknowledgement of the possibility of disjunction between subjective dispositions and objective structures in cases such as the movement from peasant to urban culture, is not carried into the work on gender where there is an invariable alignment between the masculine and feminine dispositions and the need for social reproduction. This alignment is regarded as so stable that it leads Bourdieu to claim that the phallonarcissistic view of the world can only be dislodged through complete rejection of the gendered habitus. There is no recognition

that apparent complicity can conceal potential dislocation or alienation on the part of individuals. It is precisely such dislocation that Janet Radway's (1987) study of women readers of romance fiction reveals. *Reading the Romance* shows that what might appear as a passive act of identification with highly conventional images of masculinity and femininity is in fact underlain by a more active attempt by women to work through the disappointments and tensions arising from their attempts to negotiate the competing feminine roles of mother, wife and worker. Radway's study presents a far more complex picture of contemporary gender relations than Bourdieu's notion of masculine domination and female complicity.

In a similar fashion, recent work on masculinities has revealed that with regard to 'dominant' forms of subjectivity, the habitus cannot be said to always ensure unproblematic alignment between the demands of the field and subjective dispositions. Kaja Silverman (1992), for example, has argued that the dominant conception of masculinity is an idealized fiction and is, therefore, a position that cannot be filled within the social realm. Just as, according to Lacan, the notion of the feminine is unfillable because of its negative relation to the symbolic, so the masculine, as the epicentre of meaning in a phallocentric system, is also illusory. As the moment of absolute presence in the symbolic, masculine identity rests on an impossible adequation of the biological penis with the phallus. Using a similar idea of masculinity as an imaginary and hence unfillable place, Marjorie Garber (1992) argues that attempts to occupy the position of the masculine must result, in their inevitable failure, in a degree of feminization. Developing Lacan's assertion that virile display in the human being has a feminine aspect, Garber claims that the real male cannot be embodied at all, that embodiment itself is a form of feminization. In a study of male icons (Valentino, Elvis, etc.), Garber shows how fetishized images of masculinity bear within them the traces of the feminized man-transvestite and thus point towards their own constitutive instability and displacement.

The instability of the categories of masculinity and femininity should not be construed as a crisis within contemporary identity formations. Nonetheless, Bourdieu does not seem to recognize that masculine and feminine identities are not unified configurations but a series of uneasily sutured, potentially conflictual subject positions. In short, by failing to draw out the implications of the notion of the field for an understanding of gender identity, Bourdieu has no conception of multiple subjectivity (Moore, 1994: 80). His account of the somatization of gender relations therefore tends to suggest that the symbolic formations of masculinity and femininity are unproblematically mapped on to the social realm where men unambiguously occupy the dominant position and women the subordinate one. This invariant logic of male domination and female subordination oversimplifies the complexities of gender identity in late capitalist society and hypostatizes the social realm. In the remaining sections, I will consider what the implications of Bourdieu's concept of the field might be for an understanding of gender identity.

Cathexis, Reflexivity and the Field

The concept of the field has important implications for understanding how reflexive awareness might arise with regard to gender identity. For certain theorists of identity transformation, the possibility of reflexive self-awareness arises from the aestheticization of society, or a process of aesthetic dedifferentiation, in which symbolic images are both intensified and destabilized. The problem with such theories is that the priority accorded to the notion of aesthetics forecloses an analysis of the specificity of the power relations in which a reflexive management of the self is ineluctably embedded. This aesthetic dedifferentiation leads in turn to an implicit reinstalling of a disembodied, disembedded self who moves freely across the social realm. Bourdieu's work provides an interesting contrast to this because it links the emergence of reflexivity to a process of social differentiation and, in particular, to the tensions and conflicts constitutive of a particular field of social action. The embodied potentialities of the habitus are only ever realized in the context of a specific field and, therefore, rather than being a generalized capacity, reflexivity is an irregular manifestation dependent on a particular configuration of power relations. Such a notion makes it possible to conceptualize any changes within gender identity as uneven and discontinuous.

It is in the work of thinkers such as Scott Lash (1990), Mike Featherstone (1992) and Michel Maffesoli (1988) that the idea of identity transformation is conceived of primarily as an aesthetic process. The notion of aesthetic reflexivity is partly taken from Foucault's notion of an aesthetics of existence as a form of ethical labour on the self that challenges what are held to be the self-evident, natural elements of identity. It is also derived from Baudrillard's (1983) argument that late capitalist society is increasingly dominated by a referentless symbolic logic that leads to a dedifferentiation of the distinct spheres of activity and thought characteristic of the era of high modernity. For Baudrillard, these associated notions of aestheticization, hyperreality and social implosion result in a nihilistic vision of an apolitical, indifferent mass society. Lash and Featherstone give these ideas a positive inflection by combining them with Foucault's work on the self and thereby emphasizing the expressive possibilities generated by the tendencies towards dedifferentiation. Lash claims, for example, that tendencies towards aestheticization lead to a dedifferentiation of the socio-cultural sphere instituting a postmodern regime of 'figural signification'. The intrusion of a figural aesthetics into the lifeworld problematizes life by drawing attention to its constructed nature. This has destabilizing and potentially emancipatory effects upon traditional systems of representation and, in particular, upon hegemonic constructions of collective and individual identity.

A problem with such arguments about the expressive possibilities generated by processes of aesthetic dedifferentiation is that they are based primarily on a logic of cathexis and identification which is not able to

sustain a notion of reflexivity. The transformation of identity is predicated on a moment of instantiation or identity between subject and symbolic structure. Postmodern figural sensibility operates not through meaning as does the discursive sensibility of modernity but through direct impact. It is a visual rather than a literary sensibility that is non-rational, non-hierarchical and operates through direct instantiation or the unmediated investment of the spectator's desire in the cultural object (Lash, 1990: 175). Michel Maffesoli's (1988) arguments for the emergence of a mass 'ethic of aesthetics' presume a similar logic of identification embedded in postmodern patterns of consumption.

Such a logic of cathectic identification cannot support the idea of reflexivity because cathexis is a dynamic force or psychic energy which exists prior to any critical horizon (Laplanche and Pontalis, 1973: 62-5). A critical understanding of the process of identity formation cannot arise, therefore, from the direct instantiation of the subject with symbolic structures (cf. Ricoeur, 1981). Moreover, a notion of direct identification is an impossibility in so far as it assumes an absolute submission on the part of the subject 'who would passively incorporate all the determinations of the object' (Laclau, 1994: 14). Furthermore, the notion of cathexis used to characterize the ways in which individuals identify with symbolic objects does not adequately distinguish between the different modalities this relation may assume. Luhmann, for example, distinguishes between cognitive and normative modes of identification; the former being disposed towards learning whereas the latter is not (Luhmann, 1995: 320-1). Reflexive self-knowledge would straddle the two modalities in so far as it is not possible to establish an absolute separation between them. However, reflexivity in the sense of a self-conscious shaping of identity would presumably involve a greater degree of cognitive expectation and the notion of direct instantiation fails to signal this.

Reflexivity can emerge therefore only from distanciation provoked by the conflict and tension of social forces operating within and across specific fields. It is not an evenly generalized capacity of subjects living in a detraditionalized era but arises unevenly from their embeddedness within differing sets of power relations. This suggests that any shifts in gender norms cannot be attributed to a non-specific process of social aestheticization. If there can be said to have been any attenuation of conventional notions of masculinity and femininity in the last 30 years or so, it needs to be thought of as a much more piecemeal, discontinuous affair arising from the negotiation of discrepancies by individuals in their movement within and across fields of social action. Thus, women entering the workforce after child-rearing may experience difficulties because their expectations and predispositions constituted largely through the exigencies of the domestic field sit uneasily with the objective requirements of the workplace. At the same time, this dissonance may lead to a greater awareness – what Bourdieu calls the 'lucidity of the excluded' – of the shortcomings of a patriarchally defined system of employment. In other words, reflexive awareness is

predicated on a distanciation of the subject with constitutive structures. The questioning of conventional notions of femininity does not arise from exposure to and identification with a greater array of alternative images of femininity but from tensions inherent in the concrete negotiation of increasingly conflictual female roles. Such a process is suggested in Teresa de Lauretis's work on gendered identity as both the effect of representation and that which remains beyond representation – that is the cross-cutting and conflictual practices of self-representation (De Lauretis, 1987). Furthermore, the equation of reflexive self-awareness with post-conventional modes of behaviour needs to be scrutinized (Thompson, 1996). For example, Faye Ginsburg's work on women anti-abortionists in the USA shows how the adoption of traditional modes of feminine behaviour is often accompanied by high levels of critical self-awareness (Ginsburg, 1989). In sum, if the notion of reflexivity is to have any relevance for feminism, therefore, it must be qualified with a differentiated analysis of attendant social relations and leads to a more qualified account of reflexivity as a capacity of the agent that is unevenly realized.

Beyond the Public and Private

Feminists have long insisted on a consideration of the embeddedness of the subject within specific power relations in order to correct the tacitly masculinist tendencies of objective thought. By construing the subject in 'concrete' terms attention is drawn to a microphysical layer of power and constraint that is obscured in more abstract understandings of the subject (e.g. Benhabib, 1992). In feminist political and social theory, this strategy has been used to unpack 'patriarchal' dualisms such as the public–private distinction which by being implicitly gendered naturalize a circumscribed notion of female agency confined to the domestic sphere.

Despite the force of such critiques, a problem with the insistence on embeddedness is that they often perpetuate rather than undo dualistic analyses of gender identity. Anna Yeatman (1984), for example, argues that in their recovery of domestic life, many feminists accept implicitly the logic that renders the distinction between the domestic–public as an opposition between the social and the extra-social rather than as a differentiation between two forms of sociality. A consequent assumption emerges that public sociality is the paradigm of social life and the residual status of the domestic is assured. From a Habermasian perspective, Jodi Dean (1996) argues that the public–private distinction perpetuates an analogous dualism of universality–particularity which hampers conceptions of justice. If particularity is always associated with the private, feminine realm, justice remains a transcendental and tacitly masculine ideal that has little connection to embodied, intersubjective relations. Thus, in order to conceive of justice as a dimension of validity that pertains to all intersubjective relations, it is necessary to jettison the public–private distinction and to reconceptualize civil society as a series of interconnecting discursive domains.

To overcome such dichotomies, it is necessary to develop an understanding of the internal differentiation within gender identity. The social realization of masculine and feminine identities can no longer be mapped on to a straightforward division between the public and private not least because the relationship between the two realms has become more complex in late modernity (e.g. Offe, 1987). The result of introducing such a notion of differentiation into an understanding of the social construction of gender identities, is that masculinity and femininity would be seen as imbricated in complex ways rather than as opposed and separate categories. Bourdieu's notion of the field provides a way of thinking through this differentiation within gender identity. His insistence on the autonomous logic of each field suggests that gender relations are not reproduced in an invariant way: 'there are as many ways of realizing femininity as there are classes and class fractions' (1979: 107–8). At the same time, his understanding of gender relations as a fundamental form of symbolic domination guards against a completely fragmented view of the way in which gender identity is constituted. As Laclau and Mouffe (1985) point out, such a fragmentation can lead to an 'essentialism of the elements' in which it is impossible to ascertain how subjects even begin to function as autonomous individuals. Although the categories of masculinity and femininity are internally differentiated, on the whole, men and women do not experience themselves as consciously choosing between discrete and often conflictual identities (Spelman, 1990: 15). If large-scale inequalities between men and women are to be explained then, it is also important not to lose sight of the persistence of certain symbolic norms within the diversity of masculine and feminine behaviours.

In the remaining space I will briefly outline how the concept of the field might be used within feminist theory to break down the category of the private into more discrete arenas of action. One distinction that might be made is between the fields of domestic and intimate relations. There is a tendency in some thought not only to elide the private with the domestic, but also to celebrate the latter as a haven for the reproduction of non-instrumental social relations. This is a flaw for example, in Dorothy Smith's (1987) work which, despite recognizing the extent to which the domestic is traversed by other power relations, proceeds to hermetically seal it off in order to sustain a cohesive notion of a feminine standpoint. It is also a problem in the work of Habermas who, by placing familial relations within the communicative sphere of the lifeworld, underestimates the extent to which they are crossed by an instrumental rationality that is regarded as pertaining to systems only (Fraser, 1987). By breaking down social action into distinct spheres of activity each governed by its own logic the concept of the field circumvents the conflation of the private with the domestic. The domestic might be viewed as a field governed by a logic of familial reproduction and characterized by struggles over child-care, domestic labour, division of resources, etc. While intimate relations – particularly parent-child relations – are predominantly reproduced within the domestic

sphere, it is no longer the exclusive site of the reproduction of these relations. Intimate relations, understood as centred around struggles over emotional capital, can be viewed as an increasingly unbounded field. The separation of the domestic from the intimate enables us to place claims such as those that Giddens makes about the transformation of gender relations in the context of an examination of shifts in the domestic division of labour and the extent to which these putative shifts have been translated into the fields of employment, politics, etc. For example, Sylvia Walby's (1990) argument that private patriarchy has given way to public patriarchy throws into question some of the more utopian claims about the transformation of intimate gender relations.

Conversely, the separation of the domestic from the intimate permits a consideration of possible changes in gender relations emerging from what is seen to be the new centrality of intimacy to conventionally more impersonal fields of social action. Luhmann (1986) argues, for example, that the demand for intensive forms of relations traditionally confined to the female domestic arena have spilled over into other areas of social life (also Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995). The effects of this new centrality of the intimate are contested. On the one hand, it is associated with a regression of the public sphere and a fetishization of the self (Foucault, 1978; Sennett, 1976). On the other hand, it could be seen as potentially emancipatory in that it is no longer exclusively women who are burdened with the responsibility for the emotional. As Francesca Cancian suggests, it may be liberating for women to enter into certain types of instrumental relation more usually associated with men (Cancian, 1989).

In sum, as a relational concept the field yields an understanding of society as a differentiated and open structure and provides a framework in which to conceptualize the uneven and non-systematic ways in which subordination and autonomy are realized in women's lives. By construing intimate and domestic relations as overlapping but distinct fields of behaviour, their interconnection and relations with other fields of sociality can be thought not as implacable opposition but in terms of multiple disjunction, overlap and conflict. This yields a differentiated account of gender identity and provides a way of exploring claims about the increasingly reflexive nature of gender identity in the context of specific power relations.

Conclusion

Bourdieu's work provides a corrective to certain theories of reflexive transformation which overestimate the extent to which individuals living in post-traditional order are able to reshape identity. This overemphasis on the mutable nature of identity is partly the result of a tendency to understand gender identity as a form of symbolic identification rather than as a deeply entrenched form of embodied existence. Furthermore, certain theories of reflexivity tacitly presuppose a disembedded agent and, as a result, do not consider the obstacles that confront the transposition of the feminine habitus into different fields of action. Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and

the field offers a theory of embodiment in the context of differentiated power relations that may be of use for feminist social theory.

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