



FREEDOM THROUGH KNOWLEDGE

BOURDIEU, FEMINIST THEORY AND LITERARY GENDER RESEARCH, CONCURRENT PROJECTS? ABOUT BOURDIEU'S CONTRIBUTION TO FEMINIST RESEARCH.

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THE MAIN MESSAGE IN PIERRE BOURDIEU'S (1930-2002) RESEARCH WAS; Freedom through knowledge, *La liberté par la connaissance*¹ The French researcher Christine Delphy, editor of the periodical "New feminist questions"² recounts that during May 1968 in France, the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu and his research team was the only academics who continued to work. The whole country was in a state of chaos, paralysed by general strike; Bourdieu asked his fellow researchers to photocopy their common research materials to distribute among the demonstrators.³ This story illustrates how Bourdieu's research project was characterized by an untiring effort to create a possibility of change. To Bourdieu, Freedom through knowledge means *freedom for all dominated groups in society*, and in 1998 he presented his perhaps most important contribution to feminist and gender research, the little book entitled *The masculine dominance*⁴.

ACCORDING TO THONETTE MYKING⁵, "we are facing a new trend in feminist theory today, in woman- and gender research where we have to choose whether woman- and gender research still is going to be part of a solidarity project where it, in the end, comes to *fight against any kind of repression, however its expressed and whoever it affects.*" (My emphasis) Myking believes that "*A recognition of multiplicity is about seeing "the other", not as a reflection of oneself, but as someone who might actually be different.*" Myking elaborates; "*As researchers and feminists, we face challenges related to our role as producers of knowledge. It is about finding solutions to how we as researchers can develop knowledge that does not have oppressing or hegemonic functions, but rather creating and liberating functions*" and encourages research that challenges knowledge theoretical positions, gender theoretical positions and the feminist project. Hence it may seem that Bourdieu's theory and feminist theory share the same project.

¹ The title of the collection of texts of gratitude published by the Collège de France in 2004 to honour the late Pierre Bourdieu.

² *Nouvelles Questions féministes.*

³ Kristin Ross, *Mai 68 et ses vies ultérieures*, (Editions Complexe, Le Monde diplomatique, 2005), p.224

⁴ *La domination masculine.* Seuil 1998.

⁵ Thonette Myking, Høgskolen i Stavanger "Den skapende forskning – fra et feministisk ståsted" (2004) in Lotte Selsing (red.); *Feministisk teori, kvinne- og kjønnsforskning i Rogaland*, Arkeologisk museum i Stavanger, Stavanger 2004. Pp. 9-15



DESPITE THE INTRODUCTION OF BOURDIEUSIAN CONCEPTS such as *social fields* and *symbolic capital* in our common language, his theories are almost absent in Norwegian woman and gender research. In syllabuses at the nation's woman and gender research centres one can find his theory on masculine dominance summarized in an article by Toril Moi⁶. According to Irene Iversen,⁷ feminist research was approved at universities only in the 1990's. This could be related to what Moi characterizes as a tendency to hostility towards theory⁸ in feminist research. According to Moi,⁹ feminists should appropriate earlier, masculine scientific theories, but transform them to their own purposes. Bourdieu's theory makes it possible to apprehend the dynamic of the gender relation as an overall symbolic structure where value/hierarchy (there exists an arrangement of superiority and subordination between women and men) and access/distinction (the genders operates in different spheres) are the two principles that signify the system's structure. The theory also shows how the gender system is socially incorporated, in the habitus (mentally and physically), and how differences based on gender is a question about social practice.

IN *THE MASCULINE DOMINANCE* (Bourdieu, 1998) Pierre Bourdieu argues that the existing division of gender in society is not natural, as it may seem, but culturally created. According to Bourdieu, any established order would tend to naturalise their own arbitrariness. Interaction between gender, language and reality is an interdisciplinary field of research. In different ways works by, among others, Walter Benjamin, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Roland Barthes, Michail Bachtin, Béatrice Didier, Hélène Cixous, Julia Kristeva, Judith Butler, Luce Irigaray, Gayatri Spivak and the like made it possible to question what we comprehend as self-evident truths, to categories as "natural" and "normal". In *The masculine dominance* Bourdieu elaborates central problems in works of among others Virginia Woolf, whom he credits, and Simone de Beauvoir, whom he mentions in a footnote, despite the fact that his analyses on several points are very close, or are built directly on, Beauvoir's analyses in *Le deuxième sexe*, (Beauvoir, 1949). The texts of Woolf and Beauvoir are central when it comes to the role of literature in the problems related to gender, language and reality. In Norway Camilla Collett was a central participant, and it's interesting to notice that she, in the 1860's, says practically the same thing as Beauvoir says in 1949 and Bourdieu in 1998;

⁶ Toril Moi, "Å tilegne seg Bourdieu. Feministisk teori og Pierre Bourdieus kultursosiologi." in *Feministisk litteraturteori*, (Red. Iversen, Irene). Ss.252-280.

⁷ Op.cit:18.

⁸ Op.cit:23 from Toril Moi *Jeg er en kvinne* (Oslo 2001).

⁹ Loc.cit.



COLLETT; What characterizes the fiction of our time is this never ending reasoning about the woman. The author always pops his head up from his own little knowledge, something he has experienced that without further ceremony is established as a norm for the whole kin.¹⁰

BEAUVOIR; man represents at the same time the positive and the neutral [...] there is one kind of absolute human and that is the masculine kind.¹¹

BOURDIEU; The distinctive feature of the dominants is being in a position to have their way of being particular recognized as universal.¹²

IN 1949 Simone de Beauvoir launched her conclusion; gender is not given by nature, but culturally created. *On ne naît pas femme, on le devient*, One is not born a woman, but becomes one. Beauvoir shows how women historically have been defined, and have allowed themselves to be defined as the Other in a reciprocal relation, as the other sex, subordinate to the male. To Beauvoir in 1949 it would seem that economic liberation for women could lead to a more reciprocal relation between the male and the female. Beauvoir was optimistic and thought the fight almost won¹³ when women had gained the right to vote and access to the labour market. What has nevertheless been observed, is that more formal equality of status has not brought big changes in the masculine dominance. In her essay *Three guineas* Virginia Woolf introduces what she calls the "hypnotic power of dominance"¹⁴, and she writes;

Inevitably we look upon society, so kind to you, so harsh to us, as an ill-fitting form that distorts the truth; deforms the mind; fetters the will. Inevitably we look upon societies as conspiracies that sink the private brother, whom many of us have reason to respect, and inflate in his stead a monstrous male, loud of voice, hard of fist, childishly intent upon scoring the floor of the earth with chalk marks, within whose mystic boundaries human beings are penned, rigidly, separately, artificially; where, daubed red and gold, decorated like a savage with feathers he goes through mystic rites and enjoys the dubious pleasures of power and domination while we, 'his' women, are locked in the private house without share in the many societies of which his society is composed.

The feminine "room" is the private sphere, while men are free to move "outside", in public space. Bourdieu takes his starting point in Woolf's vocabulary of mystic boundaries and rites that separates women from the man's world. According to Bourdieu, research should be directed towards an approach that enables one to apprehend this mystic dimension, that he calls the symbolic, of the masculine dominance. This dimension keeps women in their designated place. Or, as Michael Moore so accurately points out;

¹⁰ Op.cit:12.

¹¹ Simone de Beauvoir, *Le deuxième sexe* I, Gallimard, Folio, 1976, p.16.

¹² Léo Thiers-Vidal "Le masculinisme de "La domination masculine " de Bourdieu ", in http://chiennesdegarde.org/article.php3?id_article=310, 2004

¹³ "En gros nous avons gagné la partie". P.32 *Le deuxième sexe*. Gallimard 1976

¹⁴ *La domination masculine*. Seuil 1998. P.12.



Then in 1920, just to show women we're good sports, we gave them the right to vote. And guess what? We remained in power! Go figure. Suddenly, women had more votes; they could have thrown our collective male ass into the political trash heap. But what did they do? They voted for us! How cool is that? Have you ever heard of any group of oppressed people that suddenly, by their sheer numbers, takes charge – and then votes in overwhelming numbers to keep their oppressors in power?¹⁵

A reading of Beauvoir through Bourdieu's concepts of *habitus* and *symbolic power* enables one to study aspects on *how* this happens, and Bourdieu underlines the ability of literature to impart symbolic dominance. Virginia Woolf's fictional description of the masculine dominance in her novel *To the lighthouse* is, to quote Bourdieu, an "incomparable lucid evocation"¹⁶ of aspects of the masculine dominance. In her analyses on literary myths according to gender, Simone de Beauvoir showed already in 1949 that literature is an important contributor to production, and reproduction, of myths on gender. Since then literary gender research has presented among others male and female images that form the basis of our way of considering gender.¹⁷

In *The masculine dominance* Bourdieu answers two central questions raised by feminist research; 1. How and which processes leads to hierarchic ordering and marginalisation of differences? 2. How can we achieve change according to this? By using some quotations from feminist research I will try to establish a dialogue between Bourdieu's theory and feminist and gender research. In *The masculine dominance* Bourdieu draws on elements from previous feminist research, but he himself becomes an executor of masculine dominance when he selects and uses without crediting, feminist analyses of the subject.¹⁸

1. HOW AND WHICH PROCESSES LEADS TO HIERARCHIC ORDERING AND MARGINALISATION OF DIFFERENCES?

DONNA J. HARAWAY: "*The point is to learn to remember that we could have been otherwise, and might yet be.*" In *The masculine dominance* Bourdieu questions our *Doxa*, our traditional way of thinking of the world, a society's taken-for-granted, non-questioned truths.¹⁹ *The masculine dominance* presents what we can call the paradox of the *doxa*; the fact that the world order, the way it is, is *grosso modo* respected. And even more surprising, that it is repeated and that the most unbearable living conditions so often seem acceptable and even natural. The masculine dominance, and the way it is inserted and endured, is the best example on this paradoxical submission that is an effect of what Bourdieu calls symbolic power. Symbolic power/violence is an

¹⁵ Michael Moore, *Stupid White Men... And Other Sorry Excuses for the State of the Nation!* HarperCollins, 2002. P.91

¹⁶ "Une évocation incomparablement lucide" p.98 *La domination masculine*.

¹⁷ This is a large scale international research field, this article only provides two examples of contemporary Norwegian research; Bente Hellangs "Kollektivets kjønnede diskurs. Kjønn som religiøs og estetisk konstruksjon i norske middelalderballader", and "Kjønnsforskning i Rogaland".

¹⁸ On masculine dominance in Bourdieu; Nicole-Claude Mathieu "Bourdieu ou le pouvoir auto-hypnotique de la domination masculine" (1999). And Léo Thiers-Vidal "Le masculinisme de "La domination masculine" de Bourdieu" 2004.

¹⁹ "[...] *l'expérience première du monde social est celle de la doxa, adhésion aux relations d'ordre qui, parce qu'elles fondent inséparablement le monde réel et le monde pensé, sont acceptés comme allant de soi.*" *La Distinction*, p.549.



insensible and invisible power that is executed symbolically in communication and in knowledge, or more precisely, in misrecognition (the bourdieusian concept of *méconnaissance* involves the fact that those involved do not see what they are doing), recognition and, at the limit, in the feeling. It's about dominance exercised in the name of a symbolic principle that is known and recognized by the dominating and the dominated (this has great importance, if the principle is not known and acknowledged, it has a lesser effect, maybe none at all), a language (or a pronunciation), a lifestyle (or a way of thinking, talking, acting (for example heavy drug-addicts)) and, more generally, distinct characteristics such as skin colour or gender. According to Bourdieu, the social structures that exists today are not given by nature, but have emerged trough historical power struggles, and what may seem never-ending in history, is nothing but the result of a "never-ending work" of the arbitrary cultural. The naturalisation of the masculine dominance is the product of a "making never-ending" work that occurs in interrelated institutions as the family, the church and the school, and on another level, in sports and journalism.

ACCORDING TO BOURDIEU, the masculine dominance is so deeply rooted in our subconscious that it is difficult to question. It is deeply rooted in language, which leads us to the next feminist quotation. Luce Irigaray; "*language must change along with society. Failure to see the importance of changing language is an impediment to real change.*" An example on how the masculine dominance is deeply rooted in language is that in both English and French they use the same word to say *male* and *human being*, *Man* and *Homme* designs both *human being* and *male* as one. Linguistically masculine and neutral is the same in French, so that the form *il* means both *him* and *it*. In French grammar masculine has a ascendancy, the plural form *elles* (the feminine form of *they*) designates only females, which means that if one male enters the form changes to *ils*, the male form, but not the other way around, which means that the male form will not be changed by the introduction of however many females. This ascendancy not only affects grammar. According to the French philosopher Michèle Le Doeuff, the masculine dominance manifests itself by the fact that it is the social story of men and men's point of view that counts, which the following quote exemplifies: "*The entire village left the day after [...] leaving us alone with the women and children in the abandoned houses.*"²⁰ (Claude Lévi-Strauss)²¹

TO MAKE RESEARCH ON THE MASCULINE DOMINANCE POSSIBLE, questioning one's own *doxa* is necessary, which means creating a rupture with what we regard as natural. To attain such a rupture, Bourdieu explored a society, the kabylian in the 1960, which was entirely structured by the androcentric principle, with the male and the masculine as dominant. Hélène Cixous "*a phallogocentric culture is one which is structured by*

²⁰ "*Le village entier partit le lendemain dans une trentaine de pirogues, nous laissant seuls avec les femmes et les enfants dans les maisons abandonnées*".

²¹ Quote from the linguist Claire Michard (1987 p.137) in Léo Thiers-Vidal "Le masculinisme de "La domination masculine" de Bourdieu" 2004.



binary oppositions and in which the first term is valued over the second term“.²² Bourdieu shows that the principles that arrange the kabylian society still functions, but in a less obvious form, also in modern, western societies. Kabylia was, and is, a society where the masculine dominance structures society both physically and mentally, where the boundaries are physically expressed in everyday life, structuring distinct separate areas for men and women. In its most extreme form this separation leads to women living their entire lives inside, leaving the house only by marriage or death. Bourdieu’s study shows that the economical regulations that form the basis of the severe gender separation in Kabylia, still functions in society today, but in a hidden way. The unconscious androcentric, i.e. the principles that works in western society occurs only partially and often in concealed form. Which leads us to the next question.

2. HOW CAN WE ACHIEVE CHANGE ACCORDING TO THIS?

G AYATRI SPIVAK; ”Deconstruction; constantly and persistently looking into how truths are produced.” To achieve change in today’s sexual order, Bourdieu appeals to research that enables one to apprehend the symbolic dimension of the masculine dominance. To Bourdieu, real change in social structure demands a collective work. The masculine dominance is so anchored in the subconscious that is difficult to question it. Research must contribute to dissolve the facts, it must contribute to neutralize the mechanisms that neutralizes history and make what is arbitrary cultural appear as natural. Bourdieu invites us to restart history by neutralizing history’s neutralizing mechanisms. In this neutralizing labour the main issue is to re-establish the paradoxical character of the *doxa*, i.e. to question what we take for granted, while we at the same time uncover the processes in charge of transforming history into nature, the arbitrary cultural in to the natural.

IN HIS RESEARCH on ways in which social mechanisms occur, work and reproduce themselves, Pierre Bourdieu developed methods of analysis and concepts that contribute to the understanding of these processes. Bourdieu uses his study of a traditional androcentric society, the kabylian one, to create a rupture, to show that the masculine dominance is by no means natural, as it is presented, this is how it is and how it has to be, but culturally created. The masculine dominance is the result of accidental historical processes, and not something we have to endure because no alternative exists. The world does not need to continue to be organized by way of the masculine dominance. But, as far as it is approved and apprehended as natural and unavoidable, it will remain intact. The social science analysis of Bourdieu can contribute to decompose the traditional division between individual/social or private/public.²³ According to Bourdieu, dominated groups in society derive their

²² Both Beauvoir and Hélène Cixous have been interested in similar problems earlier, Cixous without crediting Beauvoir. Bourdieu credits none of them.

²³ Iversen 2002; 254.



power from their “capacity to objectivize unformulated experiences, to make them something common – one step closer to a status of public and legitimate.”²⁴ Toril Moi²⁵ writes “when today’s order is challenged by a revolting group, up to the present non articulated or private experiences will suddenly be expressed in public, with dramatic consequences.” The path that leads to transformation of the dominating order can be found by verbalizing and analyzing the unarticulated and repressed rules guiding our behaviour, as the French author Annie Ernaux put it on the occasion of Bourdieu’s death, in *Le Monde* 05.02.02: “les textes de Bourdieu ont été pour moi un encouragement à persévérer dans mon entreprise d’écriture, à dire, entre autres, ce qu’il nommait le *refoulé social*”.²⁶ To Bourdieu dominance on the basis of gender is first of all an example on symbolic violence. When symbolic violence works, it creates women and men that are one with exactly the habitus that serves to reproduce the current order, that is to say, the masculine dominance.

²⁴ “fra sin kapasitet til å objektivisere uformulerte erfaringer, til å gjøre dem til noe felles - ett skritt nærmere en status som offentlige og legitime”. Toril Moi’s translation in *Feministisk litteraturteori*, p.261.

²⁵ “Når dagens orden utfordres av en opprørs gruppe, blir hittil uutalte eller private erfaringer plutselig offentlig uttrykt, og det med dramatiske konsekvenser.” *Op.cit.* 260-261.

²⁶ To me Bourdieu’s texts have been an encouragement in my writing project to say, between other things, what he calls the suppressed social.