

Thinkers such as Foucault and Bourdieu have claimed that subordinate groups internalise the reasons for their disadvantage and thus fail to recognise them. How realistic is this?

“Poor people can’t complain; when I’m sick or need work, I may have to ask him again. I am angry in my heart”¹. Hassan, a villager in Kedah, Malaysia tells of how he has been paid less than the expected wage for filling paddy stacks, to James C. Scott in Scott’s study of what he calls ‘Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance’. Scott’s account intentionally focuses on a resistance movement which ultimately failed and disbanded. This essay examines the theoretical work of Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu to ascertain their positions on the operation of ideology from above on those within power structures. In order to speak to the question, it will become necessary to make explicit its assumptions and work within them. The theories are applied to the case study of the pseudonymous Malaysian village “Sedaka” and assessed not just on accuracy but on the insights they generate.

The Marxian paradigm sees exploitation wherever there is a shortfall between the number of hours worked and the amount of remuneration received, whereby the value of products is conceived as deriving from the quantity of labour they embody. The

¹ Jim Scott, ‘Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance’, *The Journal of Peasant Studies* (London, Frank Cass and Co Ltd., 1986), vol. 13, No 2, pp.14-15

principle behind capitalism therefore is one which institutionally depends upon exploitation to get a return on capital. Neo-classical economics does not recognise exploitation since within the neo-classical model labour is sold willingly at a price determined by the market. The question allows that economic exploitation may be one of a variety of forms of subordination undergone by “subordinate groups”. Bourdieu identifies fields by the capital that is at stake within each of them and we are reminded that it is possible to have a subordinate objective position in some or all of the fields, such as those of cultural goods, housing, intellectual distinction, employment, land, power, social class, prestige etc². Finally, the question assumes that it is possible to be conditioned into docility or obedience without being aware of it – it implies a notion of ideology and thus necessarily a unconscious/conscious mind dichotomy. Since the assertion made by the question assumes these starting points, its perceived realism is likely to be helped by a sympathetic attitude to Marxian value theory and contingent upon one’s acceptance of the theory of ideological interpellation.

Foucault’s preoccupation with power, its movement, and its categories spanned his writing career and his life. Treating social categories of deviance in *Madness and Civilization* as a function of the normal – a corollary of social solidarity and the exclusion

² Richard Jenkins, *Pierre Bourdieu* (London: Routledge, 1992), p.84

that is concomitant with it³ – he notes the complicity of the developing field of medicine from the 16th to the 20th century with the established field of law. Thus, when leprosy disappeared, it became socially expedient and medically sound to incarcerate the insane – using the newly vacated leprosariums. These socially constructed categories and phenomena are, writes Foucault, readily internalised by those who would be subordinated by them, such that chained in wet, sewerless, rat-infested cells the mad are reported as acting as if they deserved mistreatment and brutalization⁴. For Foucault, power is vested and even created in discourses of “truth”⁵. Within a repressive society – a term which for Foucault held wider inflections than a straightforward police state – citizens exist in a “false consciousness”, believing that they are free whilst for the most part not being able to recognise this delusion as deriving from a construction of the legal-medical establishment and a function of surveillance⁶.

Bourdieu’s position on power is ostensibly similar, but his innovation – the *habitus*, whilst having been understood conservatively by some, allows for individual agency and social change. The foundations of Bourdieu’s position however, are explained as follows: people’s behaviour is governed not by rules, but by an experientially maturing

³ Edith Kurzweil, *The Age of Structuralism: Lévi-Strauss to Foucault* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), pp.193-4

⁴ Kurzweil (1980), p.198

⁵ Angela Cheater, ‘Introduction’, *The Anthropology of Power: Empowerment and Disempowerment in Changing Structures*, ASA Monographs 36 (London: Routledge, 1999), p.4

⁶ Kurzweil (1980), p.221

improvisational response (*a sens du jeu*) coupled with a taught social competence. The actor's own account of their behaviour is neither an adequate insight into their motivation, nor is it a valid description of the social world; since actual practice is neither wholly conscious nor unconscious. Happily, there is often a correlation between one's internalised constructs and others' and this provides, "the illusion of immediate understanding"⁷ in the form of *doxa*. However, since an individual's sense of self is deeply rooted in one's acculturated cultural competences and one's position within the social space, Jenkins interprets Bourdieu as arguing that therefore people are largely incapable of perceiving social reality as anything other than inevitable and integral to who they are.

The *habitus* enables Bourdieu to escape from the dichotomy that Martin Hollis characterises thus: "Where Plastic Man has his causes, Autonomous Man has his reasons"⁸. The habitus operates dialectically for each individual whereby as the particular capital of a given field is contested and values arise from the contestation process, the habitus is both produced by the objective relations and adjusts to the objective conditions. It is the limits of the thinkable as well as one's ambitions and goals that are delineated by an "adjustment of *habitus* to the necessities and to the probabilities inscribed in the field"⁹.

⁷ Jenkins (1992), p.70

⁸ Martin Hollis, *Models of Man* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), p.12; cited here from *ibid.* p.66

⁹ *ibid.*, p.73

Thus, it is possible to find in Bourdieu's model not merely an explanation for why, as Jenkins writes, "history tends to repeat itself and the *status quo* is perpetuated"¹⁰, but also a model which can account for the cultural and temporal flux in the choices an individual may have reason to consider their most rational or valuable as they negotiate social life. The ambivalence of this contingent loose-fitting habitus on the one hand and the constraint of one's position within any given field on the other means that the prognosis for subordinate groups is bounded at either extreme. Bourdieu's words are as follows: "We can always say that individuals make choices, as long as we do not forget that they do not choose the principals [sic] of these choices"¹¹.

In the Muda Plain region, where the village known as Sedaka is located, in 1975 all paddy cultivation and harvesting was done by hand. By 1980, just five years later, 80 percent of the harvesting was done by combine. In Malaysia's "green revolution" of agricultural mechanisation and double cropping, peasants faced sharp rent increases and lower availability of employment. Scott describes how many responded with a campaign of everyday resistance. This discrete form of low-level protest would be less likely to attract violent reprisals by the state and could remain anonymous. It largely consisted of industrial dispute staples such as foot-dragging, dissimulation, false-compliance,

¹⁰ ib., p.81

¹¹ ib., p.77

pilfering, feigned ignorance, slander, arson and sabotage. The three major developments during this period were the sabotage of combine harvesters from 1976 onwards, an abortive implied strike and the 1979-80 disappearance of more than 14 gunny sacks during harvest.¹²

To conclude, this absence of acute rural rebellion can be interpreted as both a confirmation and a negation of the power of a dominant ideology. John Gledhill argues that the low-level of the protests does not represent the peasants' "false consciousness" regarding their situation. Far from it, he suggests: "more overt and organized forms of popular resistance tend to constitute a fatal misreading of the real prospects for emancipation"¹³. Scott concurs that "there is surely no need to assume that it drives [sic] from some symbolic hegemony, let alone, consensus. The duress of the quotidian is quite sufficient"¹⁴. The methodological difficulty of distinguishing between a subordinate group's genuine consciousness of the power relations which bind them, as against a false consciousness which has interpellated them into civil society cannot, unfortunately, be resolved within the theoretical models provided by Foucault or Bourdieu.

¹² Scott (1986)

¹³ John Gledhill, *Power and its Disguises: Anthropological perspectives on politics* (London: Pluto Press, 1994), p.81

¹⁴ Scott (1986), p.15

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