

Book Review

Manet: A Symbolic Revolution and Classification Struggles: General Sociology, Volume 1 Lectures at the Collège de France

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Bourdieu, P. (2017). *Manet: A Symbolic Revolution*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Bourdieu, P. (2018). *Classification Struggles: General Sociology, Volume 1 Lectures at the Collège de France, 1981 - 1982*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Pierre Bourdieu died in 2003. Or, at least as far as I was concerned he did. It was in the summer of 2003 that I found out that Bourdieu had in fact died the year before, in January, 2002. Even now, looking back, quite how I missed that one I am still not entirely sure. Still, as it transpires in one sense it doesn't really matter when Bourdieu died; his death has not signalled anything like the final word on his otherwise already prodigious intellectual output. It is no small irony, if not an entirely predictable one, that a thinker who went to such great pains to demonstrate how the spread of market principles kills off the social conditions for great cultural works, has been brought back to life on numerous occasions since his death in the service of those very principles. This review passes comment on two (more) works by Bourdieu. Like those before them, both are based on transcriptions of lectures delivered at the Collège de France.

The first of these entitled *Manet: A Symbolic Revolution* was published in 2017. Given the exalted place occupied by Manet within the pantheon of great French artists, coupled with Bourdieu's love of debunking myths in general but myths about art(-ists) in particular, a book on Edouard Manet (1832 – 1883) was an historical inevitability. That and the fact that positioning oneself in relation to Manet and his painterly legacy constitutes something of a rite of passage among the doyens of French literary and intellectual life. In taking up the mantle of 'explaining' Manet, Bourdieu was following in the footsteps of the likes of Bataille and his contemporary and good friend, Michel Foucault. Needless to say, Bourdieu deploys his own conceptual machinery in order to (re-)state the truth about an icon of French culture.

Manet runs to a sizeable 586 pages and comprises three main parts. These are divided as follows: one, edited transcripts of 18 previously unpublished lectures on the subject of Manet and his work delivered between January 1999 and March 2000 (pp. 1 – 350); two, a text by Christophe Charle entitled, *Opus Infinitum*, which explicates links between the lectures, the unfinished manuscript, and Bourdieu's oeuvre more broadly (pp. 351 – 362); three, an unfinished manuscript researched and written in collaboration with Bourdieu's ex-wife, Marie-Claire, and which the editors elected to title, *Manet the Heresiarch: Genesis of the Artistic and Critical Fields* (pp. 363 – 489). Various appendices substantiate the remaining pages.

Both the lectures and the unfinished manuscript reconstruct Manet through the organising concept of 'symbolic revolution'. Similar to the *Rules of Art*, published in French in 1992 at around the time *Manet* was being drafted, Bourdieu puts to work the concept of field (*champs*) to shatter the illu(sio)-n of internalist accounts of the 'uncreated creator' on the one hand, and externalist accounts of Manet and his milieu on the other. Doing so allows him to

explicate the conditions under which Manet, partially knowingly but largely unknowingly, brought about a painterly revolution, one which would set the course of French and Western European painting on a radically different direction. The lectures tell this story in rich and vivid detail; the unfinished manuscript does so also, albeit in a manner that lacks the vitality and panache offered up by Bourdieu the orator.

As an historical study, *Manet* demonstrates characteristically vast amounts of knowledge on the part of the author(s). The account of the salons where Manet garnered and consolidated his share of social capital are rich in detail, as is the commentary on the paintings featured in the final lecture. Bourdieu's airing at various stages throughout the lectures of his anxiety at having bitten off more than he could chew in taking on the subject of Manet and his impact on French painting, provides a welcome glimpse of the clay feet of a man who otherwise comes across at times in his writing as omniscient. I should say too that I thoroughly enjoyed those occasions during the lectures where Bourdieu comes off-piste in that way that he was inclined to do in order to deliver some deft existential-sociological insight. The insight featured on page 307 which begins with the line, 'Sociology can give cynical overtones to just about anything' and which ends in Weber being chastised for not pushing his explication of 'charisma' far enough, is one example of just such an insight. I heartily recommend it.

Finally, it is worth noting that as a material artefact *Manet* constitutes a very regal addition to the book shelf. It includes an inset of forty two high-resolution images of works done by Manet and the artists whose influence he felt most keenly. As an objectified piece of cultural capital, then, this book speaks of the kind of haute-bourgeois habitus that so much of Bourdieu's work was intended to deconstruct. All of which only adds to the ironic charm of holding in one's hands one of but not the most recent, or indeed the last, works of an author who died some 16 or 17 years ago now.

Published in 2018, *Classification Struggles* (henceforth, *CS*) is the most recent work by Bourdieu. 'Taste classifies and it classifies the classifier'. Thus goes the oft-cited line from *Distinction*, which has become something of a paradigmatic principle around which so much sociological work on cultural taste has subsequently been organised. *CS* was recommended to me by a friend and colleague who knew me to be using the concept as part of the research I am currently undertaking. I confess, then, that my expectations for this book were strongly rooted in the particular interests around which my current research is organised. My hope was that it would cast some more light on the development and intellectual genealogy of the concept of classification struggles, illuminating in greater detail its clear debt to the work of Durkheim and Mauss on primitive classifications, Weber on the symbolic dimensions of class stratification, and Marx on class struggle as a motor of historical change. This was not to be the case, however.

CS comprises a transcription of eight one-hour lectures delivered between April and June 1982, and a twenty-one page postscript written by Patrick Champagne and Julien Duval. Early on in the first lecture, Bourdieu (2018: 3) notes that so much of 'French-style teaching' is happy to gloss over important (social) truths in the name of a 'cosy feeling of shared intelligence and an equal intellect'. There was little that could be plausibly described as 'cosy' about reading *CS*. This text is an exercise in technical exposition. The first four lectures are abstract, theoretical and frankly require quite a bit of work for relatively little reward (particularly, say, if you have read the likes of *Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* (1992), *Sociology in Question* (1993), *Pascalian Meditations* (2000), etc.).

The remaining four lectures comprise a more palatable mixture of theory and applied examples, spanning a range of themes including: reality and representation; symbolic capital; symbolic capital and classification struggles; and symbolic boundaries and classifications. Notwithstanding this, I found *CS* to be a fairly dry series of relatively inchoate and overly ornate theoretical sketches on a range of topics which are covered more succinctly and successfully elsewhere. Of course, the ideas contained within *CS* were formulated within the mind of Pierre Bourdieu and for that reason alone, arguably, one should make the effort to read the book. That said, as an undergraduate these are not the kinds of lectures I would have enjoyed, because the rambling would have irritated me; as a lecturer, these are not the kinds of lectures I aspire to deliver.

In summary, how these latest works 'by' Bourdieu, along with three more years' worth of transcriptions of lectures due for publication over the course of the next few years, will be received, is a site for observing many of the social and cultural dynamics they themselves were intended to cast light upon and capture. Whereas *Manet*, I suspect, will be of interest to a wider, inter-disciplinary audience on account of its subject matter, *Classification Struggles* will appeal more to a restricted audience and Bourdieu aficionados. In the meantime, knowing there is yet more to come from a thinker capable of such searing sociological and existential insights, interspersed with no end of esoteric bon mots, provides me with a genuine sense of pleasure and anticipation in equal measure.