

Introducing Bourdieu to Borofsky

In *Making History: Pukapukan and Anthropological Constructions of Knowledge*, Robert Borofsky draws on his nearly four years of fieldwork among the Pukapukans to explore how both Pukapukans and anthropologists acquire and validate knowledge in order to construct history. Borofsky is concerned primarily with addressing the problem of the revival of the *Akatawa*, the division of the people of Pukapuka into two groups; the Pukapukans whom Borofsky interviewed all indicated, although sometimes in contradictory or incomplete ways, that the *Akatawa* was a traditional Pukapukan practice, revived in 1976, although he notes that during the previous century five other professional anthropologists had studied Pukapukans and had not recorded any mention of the *Akatawa*. The dilemma that Borofsky seeks to resolve is why this traditional form of social organization was not recorded, or why the Pukapukans insist that it is indeed a traditional practice. Through exploring this problem he theorizes about the nature of the Pukapukan conception of knowledge.

It is unfortunate that Borofsky was either unfamiliar with or did not use the work of Pierre Bourdieu in analyzing the problem of the *Akatawa*. By shifting the focus of anthropology towards agency in its relation to structures, namely how actors internalize structure, Bourdieu introduced a way to bridge such seeming gaps between the subjective and objective. The logic of practice, and the *habitus* with which it is associated, provides a framework in which one may understand how the individual subjective agent is related to the objective structures of society. “The *habitus*...is what makes it possible to inhabit institutions” (Bourdieu, 57). By applying the theoretical perspectives of Bourdieu to the ethnographic data and seeming quandary with which

Borofsky was faced, one may see an excellent example of what has come to be known as practice theory in anthropology.

“The theory of practice as practice insists...that the objects of knowledge are constructed...and...that the principle of this construction is the system of structured, structuring dispositions, the *habitus*” (Bourdieu, 52). What the anthropologist is then interested is more than mere phenomenological description of informants’ knowledge, but an analysis of how such knowledge was constructed through their *habitus*. In place of asking informants what a particular action means, the anthropologist ought to comprehend the relation of the particular action, a practice, in relation to the “systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary in order to attain them” (Bourdieu, 53), that is the *habitus*.

This is similar to the understanding Borofsky defends of the contingent and fallible nature of knowledge based on its usefulness in the sense that pragmatists, such as William James, use it.

The cultural constructs should not be mistaken for ‘reality’ in a correspondence sense of truth, for a set of objective facts that all can perceive and agree on. The ambiguities, manipulations, and deceptions surrounding property claims make it doubtful that individuals fully grasp all the complexities involved – even for land they themselves claim. But what the constructs do, and do quite well in my opinion, is provide Pukapukans with guidelines for action. They offer explanations. They give present-day claims an aura of legitimacy, a sense of fairness. And they provide room for manipulation, for people to adjust social ideologies to the precarious balances that must be maintained between people and resources on a small coral atoll (Borofsky, 32-33).

Just as Bourdieu has argued, Borofsky indicates that Pukapukans need not understand the structure about which they are making claims; they know how to play the game but they do not know the rules in any explicit fashion. In further agreement, Borofsky notes that knowledge for Pukapukans is regarded as such insofar as it is ordered towards useful ends. “The practical world that is constituted in the relationship with the *habitus*, acting as a system of cognitive and

motivating structures, is a world of already realized ends” (Bourdieu, 53). Through the practices of making land claims, Pukapukans employ a knowledge of which they are not fully cognizant, nor need they be in order to attain their already constituted ends. Through these practices they generate a social structure in which such practices are not only logical but regenerate themselves through subsequent action.

While knowledge may be constructed such that it is useful, Bourdieu is interested in defending some limitation on the possibilities of knowledge. Based in the Marxist tradition, wherein “men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past” (Marx, *Eighteenth Brumaire*), Bourdieu argues that the “infinite yet strictly limited generative capacity” of knowledge “is difficult to understand only so long as one remains locked in the usual antinomies...of determinism and freedom, conditioning and creativity, consciousness and the unconscious, or the individual and society” (Bourdieu, 55). Through his understanding of *habitus* one can understand how it is that “being the product of a particular class of objective regularities, the *habitus* tends to generate all the ‘reasonable’, ‘common sense’, behaviours (and only these) which are possible within the limits of these regularities, and which are likely to be positively sanctioned because they are objectively adjusted to the logic characteristic of a particular field, whose objective future they anticipate” (Bourdieu, 55-56). Such regularities, Bourdieu argues are to be sought in the specific practices which “generate dispositions objectively compatible with the conditions and in a sense pre-adapted to their demands” (Bourdieu, 54). That is to say that practices reinforce the structures in which they make sense: this is the logic of practice.

In a similar fashion, trying to explain how it is that pragmatism maintains limits on the possibilities of constructed knowledge, James asks rhetorically, “Pent in, as the pragmatist more than any one else sees himself to be, between the whole body of funded truths squeezed from the past and the coercions of the world of sense about him, who so well as he feels the immense pressure of objective control under which our minds perform their operations (James, 588)?” The objective compatibility and ‘fitness’ of knowledge is thus to be found in two primary relations: the past and one’s social milieu. Borofsky observed that among the Pukapukans, “concerns with status and status rivalry involve two interacting principles. One focuses on hierarchy, dependency, and deference toward superiors. The other emphasizes autonomy and equality with one’s peers” (Borofsky, 77). These two concerns, I argue are analogous to the historically and socially constructed nature of knowledge as delimited by Bourdieu.

“The *habitus*, a product of history, produces individual and collective practices – more history – in accordance with the schemes generated by history” (Bourdieu, 54). As “a present past that tends to perpetuate itself into the future by reactivation in similarly structured practices” (Bourdieu, 54), we are all constrained by our reliance on the “body of funded truths squeezed from the past.” Bourdieu further argues that “the practices that are generated by the *habitus* and are governed by the past conditions of production of their generative principle” (Bourdieu, 62) account for “the tendency of groups to persist in their ways, due *inter alia* to the fact that they are composed of individuals with durable dispositions that can outlive the economic and social conditions in which they were produced, can be the source of misadaptation as well as adaptation, revolt as well as resignation” (Bourdieu, 62). It is in a historical context that the *habitus* that predisposes the agent to particular practices is generated, however, because it is

constructed, knowledge or the *habitus* may be transformed within certain limits proposed by and established through the historical process of generation.

Historical constraints are not the only factor through which knowledge is hemmed in, but rather “practices...can...only be accounted for by relating the social conditions in which the *habitus* that generated them was constituted” (Bourdieu, 56). The particular conditions of the generation of *habitus* for Bourdieu rest on social differences that give rise to and are yet reproduced by practices. “Social treatments that tend to transform instituted difference into natural distinction...durably inscribed in the body and belief” (Bourdieu, 58), are conceived such that “the objective homogenizing of group or class *habitus* that results from homogeneity of conditions of existence...enables practices to be objectively harmonized without any calculation or conscious reference to a norm and mutually adjusted in the absence of any direct interaction” (Bourdieu, 58). Borofsky observed a great deal of the genesis of natural distinctions within the context of Pukapukan consensus, which subverted previously held personal beliefs such that “social harmony often implicitly suggests validity...truth resides in the consensus of the community” (Borofsky, 114). That is not to say that when consensus is reached that all members of the community are placated. Rather, it delimits what can be accepted as public knowledge. So while “diversity is a significant element in the organization of cultural knowledge,” (Borofsky, 122) “ridicule and challenges put limits on what constitutes publicly acceptable knowledge” (Borofsky, 123). Pukapukans are confined by a variety of factors, including past knowledge and shared knowledge, as to what may be contested and what must be regarded as fixed, taken as internalized nature through the *habitus*. This type of pragmatic knowledge is not concerned with what actually happened, but is concerned rather with how “people remember experiences from the past in light of what seems plausible to them today” (Borofsky, 118). “The

habitus is precisely this immanent law, *lex insita*, inscribed in bodies by identical histories, which is the precondition not only for the co-ordination of practices but also for practices of co-ordination” (Bourdieu, 59).

With regard to the problem of the *Akatawa*, Borofsky argues that when dealing with the creation of traditional knowledge “the picture that emerges is not really one of conflict between preserver of tradition and creative artist; it is rather one of the preservation of tradition by the constant re-creation of it” (Borofsky, 125). “The dispositions durably inculcated by the possibilities and impossibilities, freedoms and necessities, opportunities and prohibitions inscribed in the objective conditions” (Bourdieu, 54) provide the field in which knowledge may be generated based on the constraints of history of social context. Such constraints are evidenced in and yet reproduced by specific practices. The *habitus* becomes “embodied history, internalized as a second nature and so forgotten as history...[it] is the active presence of the whole past of which it is the product” (Bourdieu, 56). Ethnographers need not conceive of the Pukapukans as *either* having created the *Akatawa* or having simply revived a past tradition; in structuring their practices in accord with a collective memory, through their *habitus*, the Pukapukans are generating a history of the *Akatawa*.

Although “the *habitus* is the principle of a selective perception of the indices tending to confirm and reinforce it rather than transform it, a matrix generating responses adapted in advance to all objective conditions identical to or homologous with the (past) conditions of its production; it adjusts itself to a probable future which it anticipates and helps to bring about because it reads it directly in the present of the presumed world, the only one it can ever know” (Bourdieu, 64). Thus, Bourdieu provides what is at once the most useful and yet most paradoxical aspect of the theory of practice, namely that the agent of conservation is also the

agent of transformation. It is through the slippage that occurs when the *habitus* is embodied in practices that the *habitus* may be altered in accordance with the new practices. Such transformation is not conscious to the agents, however, its effect on the structures is perceptible as the *habitus* adapts itself to present conditions by imperceptibly altering the dispositions of the agents. This process is evidenced in such practices as the *Akatawa* wherein “traditional knowledge must continually adjust to changing circumstances, must continually adapt, so as not to die out (or become buried away in some archive)” (Borofsky, 145). It is interesting here that both Bourdieu and Borofsky attribute the active process of adaptation not to the agents themselves but to the traditional knowledge or *habitus*. Bourdieu’s claims are resonant with those of Sahlins, whom Borofsky utilizes to argue that “the reproduction of a structure [can become] its transformation” (Borofsky, 142). The very act of carrying out or embodying a traditional action can transform it; it is through the reproduction of social structures that mutations can occur. “Thus Pukapukan traditions, in being preserved, are being altered. But in being altered, they are also being preserved” (Borofsky, 144). By reviving traditions, or rather experiencing and producing a new *habitus*, Pukapukans are infusing their practices with new meanings, allowing the traditions to remain useful for Pukapukan society. “The past is being made meaningful to those upholding it in the present. Perhaps Pukapukans ...preserve a past that never was, but they preserve it in a way that is meaningful to present-day audiences” (Borofsky, 144).

A final aspect of Borofsky’s analysis of Pukapukan epistemological structures that is of interest to practice theory is the mechanism by which Pukapukans come to claim knowledge. It is through practices, informal situations in which practical knowledge is required to cope or to defend one’s status position, that knowledge is transmitted. The explicit desire of those who

revised matrilineal *wua* social organization on Pukapuka was to have the younger generation experience matrimoieties in operation, rather than have them explained in words. This substantiates Borofsky's claim that Pukapukans learned through observation and participation (Borofsky, 135), the *habitus* was inculcated in them through their practices which in turn reproduced the *habitus*. Borofsky further notes that "knowledge in Pukapuka is often acquired in the context of some activity. It is embedded in some purpose; it is situationally relevant" (Borofsky 78). The result is that

Pukapukans generally have a pragmatic orientation toward knowledge. They are interested in the application of knowledge to specific ends – to resolving problems faced in particular contexts, with particular audiences. To go beyond this pragmatic orientation, to a more correspondent sense of truth, clearly poses difficulties. Even if we assume that there is a single, correct answer to a problem, which well might not be the case, it is not immediately obvious how an individual might discover it (Borofsky, 104).

Borofsky argues that whether or not a historical precedent for *Akatawa*, as it was used 1976-1980, ever existed is not of concern. What Borofsky's informants provided "was probably less a set of remembered facts than an explanatory form for validating knowledge. It was a style of explanation – a typification of the facts in which a 'particular set of events could be narratively ordered and meaningfully understood'" (Borofsky, 151). In Bourdieu's terms, the construction of the practice of *Akatawa* and the *habitus* that it embodied allowed Pukapukans to misrecognize the major social relations around which the *Akatawa* was revived.