



Michael Grenfell

Bourdieu's Metanoia: Seeing the Social World Anew

“The book’s central theme is exactly what it is to see the world from [Bourdieu’s] ‘gaze’ - and, indeed how we might do it”

In a piece I wrote about the genesis of this publication, I confess that I seem to have written ‘an almost embarrassing amount’ about Bourdieu - [Here](#) In fairness to myself, and unlike many commentators who seem happy to speculate endlessly on what he did and did not say, much of my own writing has addressed practical applications of his philosophy and method to studies in education, language, art, biography, ethnography, etc. That is, rather than endless debates about what is *habitus*...

It has been a forty odyssey for me: and still the richness of his work inspires and delivers new insights into what it is to view the world from a Bourdieusian perspective.

Bourdieu himself at one point argues that what is needed is a ‘new gaze’ on the social world – a metanoia – but adds that the path to developing it is ‘costly’. The book’s central theme is exactly what it is to see the world from this ‘gaze’ – and, indeed, how we might do it. However, the book actually began as another book, and then evolved into different one, and then another. The first version entailed me going back and re-reading Bourdieu’s entire oeuvre from his earliest to his posthumous publications. But, whilst this was going on, I was also exploring a range of philosophical and methodological issues that had arisen in my own experience of conducting research with Bourdieu. The text then came together from two directions: coming forward in taking a chronological approach to his various works and writing, but reading back into these from the earliest works to the summative positions he arrived at on a number of methodological and philosophical points. We therefore see the expansion of his ideas and their significance.

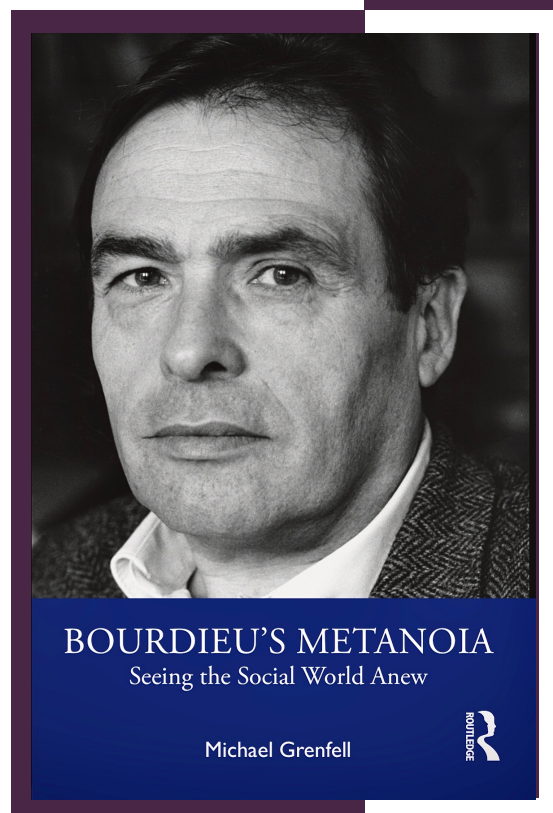
The chapters in the book – entitled *Bourdieu’s Metanoia: Seeing the Social World Anew* - cover all the key areas of Bourdieu’s work: Algeria, the Béarn, Schools and Education, Culture, Sport, Law, Fashion, Religion, Higher Education, Fine Arts, Literature, Economics, Politics and the State. Yet, running alongside these, both within chapters and in periodic

Interludes are ‘parallel texts’, where I trace the impact of Bourdieu’s early visceral experiences, the kind of philosophical and methodological epiphanies these gave rise to and how they shaped his subsequent investigations. We see the nature of Bourdieusian science and how it differs from academic orthodoxies – the kind of epistemological breaks he undertook and the methodological vigilance he consequently needed to adopt. Central to this mission is his view of *symbolic power* as represented across cultures and time, and its effects in terms of *symbolic violence* and *social suffering*. The state by way of its nature to ‘unify’, ‘integrate’, ‘monopolise’ and ‘universalise’ is complicit in these phenomena, and the book explores a range of social institutions in exemplifying the general and the particular: How different social contexts are individually instantiated but share underlying structures and their generating principles: what might constitute *resistance* to the pernicious effects of state and institutional power.

Language is also a crucial part of Bourdieu’s project, and the book discusses it from a range of angles. The language of education, classrooms, and scholastic discourse, of course. But, also his attack on conventional theories of language and what this critique implies for language use more generally. The discussion drills down into Kantian aesthetics to tease out the relational dynamics of *categories of thinking* – their provenance and limits – and thus also the meaning of terms used in political policies, including the educational. And, then there is the status of Bourdieu’s own analytic language itself: *Habitus*, *Field*, *Capital*, etc. I argue that these terms should not be seen as mere ‘metaphors’ or ‘heuristics’, but as ‘epistemological matrices’ that come with their own exegetic theory of practice. In this way, each term implies all the others.

The book does also set out clearly what it is to do Bourdieusian research: the ‘construction of research object’ and ‘participant objectivation’/ ‘reflexivity’ – and ‘field analysis’ (the field and the field of power, the field and the habitus of those in the field). The outcomes of such research, it is argued, need to be understood as a kind of ‘reflexive objectivity’ or ‘praxeological science’ – one that also demands an epistemological reading. This approach to writing and reading research is expressed in terms of developmental levels of insight as the nature of the relationship between the subject and the object is explored in greater and greater depths. Bourdieu’s research does not present itself as a ‘once-and-for-all’ discovery but as an ongoing scientific engagement. In this project, as Bourdieu did, there is the need to go back and rework data over a long period of time in order ‘to see’ the world from the particularity of the instance.

The book hence is grounded on ‘practical imperatives’: that of Bourdieu, and those wishing to develop and extend his science in their own research. It is a position that entails challenging the conventions of the academy and salient professional discourses. Nevertheless, Bourdieu’s *Metanoia* underscores the extent to which his work needs to be appreciated from a personal as well as a professional perspective. He stated that there were in fact two Bourdieus: an ‘empirical’ one and a ‘scientific’ one. The ‘empirical’ Bourdieu is like everyone else; he gets angry, irritated, is nervous, etc. However, the ‘scientific’ Bourdieu can then objectify why this is so, why Bourdieu responded like this. He then adds



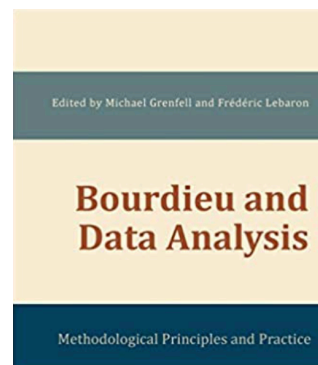
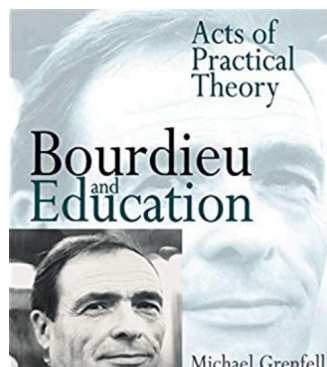
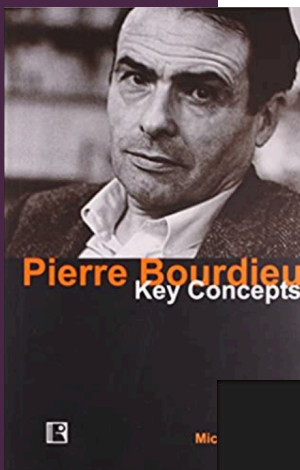
that he had discovered how the ‘scientific’ Bourdieu could influence the ‘empirical’ one. He goes on to argue that his method hence represents a way for any individual to ‘tear’ themselves out the social impulses imposing upon them and offers the opportunity to ‘construct something like an (autonomous) subject’. The dimensions of these arguments are all discussed in the book in terms of the ‘why’ and the ‘how to’ do it.

In a similar way, in writing the book, I realized that using Bourdieu’s philosophy has in fact been a way for me to express my own philosophy. Our respective philosophies are therefore both individual to each of us and share something that we both had in common. I have seen that the challenge is hence less to *apply* Bourdieu’s methods and concepts than to see the social world from such an epistemological point of view: what I describe as ‘an epistemology that becomes an ontology’.

In reading this book and appreciating *Bourdieu’s Metanoia*, where it originates and what it leads to, my wish is that the reader finds in it enough it to undertake a similar journey in their own work and lives – both personal and professional.

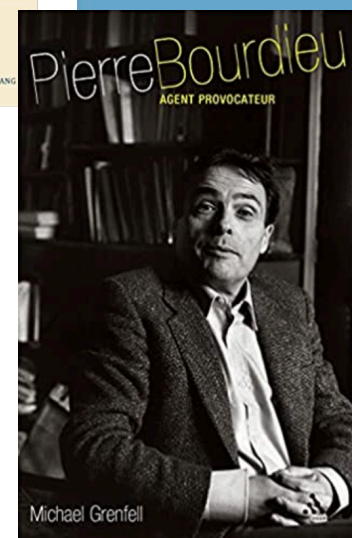
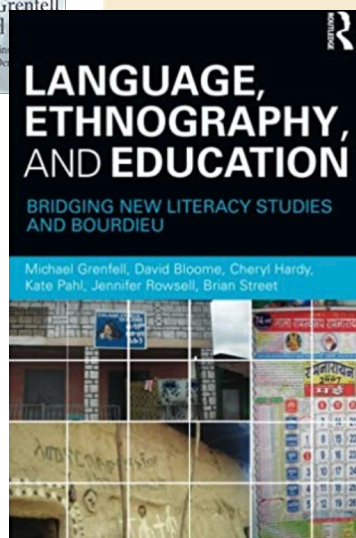
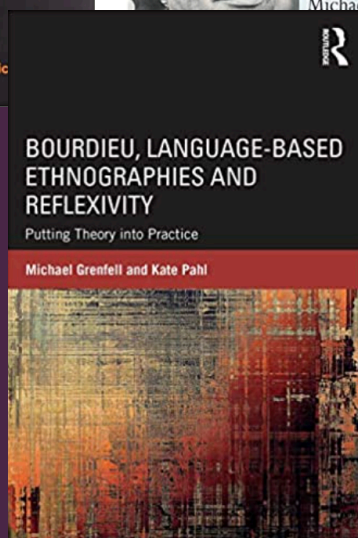
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Michael Grenfell has held Chair positions in Ireland, Scotland and England, including 1904 Chair of Education in Trinity College Dublin, Research Director at the University of Southampton, and Adjunct Professor at the University of Canberra, Australia. He has an extensive background of research and publications on the French social philosopher Pierre Bourdieu, with whom he worked on various projects including three periods as visiting scholar at the École des Hautes Études, Paris. His specialisms include the fine arts, biography, culture, language and education.



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with contributions from Adrian Blackledge,
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**Bourdieu, Language
and Linguistics**



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