

Pierre Bourdieu's Theory of the Symbolic: A Review and Appraisal

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The thesis introduces the subject of the dissertation in Chapter One by discussing the significance of the study of symbolism in sociology and the importance of symbolism in social life. This is followed by a delineation of the importance of Pierre Bourdieu's contribution to sociology and a brief comparison of his approach to symbolism with that of other major contributors to the field, namely, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, and Clifford Geertz. The thesis then goes on in Chapter Two to trace the links between Bourdieu's theory of the symbolic and earlier traditions, which is a relationship marked by continuity and rupture. The traditions discussed are those of neokantianism, structuralism, the Marxist and Weberian traditions, relational structuralism and phenomenology. The theory is placed within the context of Bourdieu's theory of practice next, in Chapters Three and Four, by examining the concepts of practice, of habitus, of fields, of capitals, and the notion of an economy of practice. This is followed by an empirical exemplification of the theory with reference to the Shah Bano case in Chapter Five, which is an attempt to see how far the theory works in a new context. Bourdieu's critique of neoliberalism is critically discussed in Chapter Six, in the light of which certain limitations of his theory are identified. The thesis concludes by discussing in Chapter Seven the contribution of Pierre Bourdieu's social theory to sociological theory in general and to French social theory in particular; an examination of appraisals of his theory of the symbolic; and a discussion of its relevance for further research in the Indian context.