
Pierre BOURDIEU, *Manet: une révolution symbolique*
(Paris, Le Seuil, 2013)

Commenting on his perch at Collège de France in the 1980s, Pierre Bourdieu described the institution as a place for “consecrated heretics” [Bourdieu, 1988: 105]. The phrase lingers in mind as one reads through Bourdieu’s *Manet*. Bourdieu’s interest in fields of cultural production proceeds from an intuition: that they make it possible to understand change. Change includes innovation in the aesthetic content of art works and cultural artifacts, but also the evolution of our beliefs in the value of these things—in other words, the production of belief. That heresy may become consecrated is a prime example of that evolution. The production of belief in turn has two analytically distinct dimensions: the production of our confidence in the value of individual things, and the construction of the very standards for what shall count as valuable. *Manet* is interested in the latter, which one could refer to as the production of legitimacy. There is something implicit and intriguing in Bourdieu’s central claim on the topic: change in our views of legitimacy has something dramatic to it. It happens through Copernican watersheds, rather than series of incremental shifts. Turning heresies into orthodoxies requires symbolic revolutions, and symbolic revolutions call for prophets. Manet was the prophet of modern art.

Based on Bourdieu’s late lectures at Collège de France and on an unfinished manuscript, the book introduces little new empirical evidence, but artfully organizes extant scholarship in support of its main arguments. How could Edouard Manet’s radical aesthetics topple the mainstream of the mid-19th century French art world? Bourdieu’s answer draws heavily on Weber’s analysis of charisma. Manet is painted as the charismatic renegade that shattered the old academic establishment, before being glorified in the new regime he ushered in. That insight works as a launching pad, the book then reaching a high point as Bourdieu deploys his analytical machinery to expose the social conditions of possibility of charisma and successful prophecy.

Not surprisingly—but the sense of familiarity with a text we read for the first time is arguably among the book’s strengths—accounting for Manet’s charisma involves situating his trajectory within the fields it traversed and transformed. The analysis here mirrors Bourdieu’s developments on Gustave Flaubert in *The Rules of Art*, his other major exploration of the dynamics of cultural production, centered on the literary field. In fact, the uncanny symmetry between the two figures goes a long way to substantiating the point that structural positions, not idiosyncratic personalities or field-specific histories, matter for understanding the transformative power of charismatic individuals. Manet’s background and artistic pedigree made him a good candidate to charismatic legitimacy. Among other things, his inherited wealth came with a disposition to art for art’s sake—a commitment to purity that served him well as the founder of a new church. Having successfully studied under the best academic masters, he also had the anointment of the old system. His moves to overthrow it therefore looked credibly disinterested.

The book is at its most rewarding when it sticks to the figure of Manet and brings the religious analogy to bear to cast him both as a ground- and idol-breaker. In contrast it struggles to find its focus when portraying the personnel, rites, and institutions that helped the new belief to hold and solidify. To be a successful prophet, Manet needed enthusiasts, apostles, interpreters. In the world of 19th century French painting, these were the collectors, critics and dealers who embraced the modernist revolution, and gradually formed the field within which Manet’s vision would be celebrated. When describing that transition from revelatory prophecy to established belief, Bourdieu runs into the limitations of building on virtually no original data. The book sputters as a result, unable to carry forward the religious metaphor that otherwise served it so well. For that matter, *The Rules of Art* offered a more compelling picture of the art world around literature that participated in its worship and valuation.

The contribution of *Manet* is elsewhere, and it may be more important. The book is noteworthy because it ties some loose ends in Bourdieusian theory, and because it shows Bourdieu pushing the limits of his own conceptual apparatus to think outside the Bourdieusian toolbox, thereby speaking to issues that are central in sociological theory today.

It would be misleading to read Bourdieu as arguing that Manet launched a heterodox aesthetic movement against the orthodoxy of the establishment, following a challenger *vs.* incumbent narrative

characteristic of fields of cultural production as described in his earlier work [e.g. Bourdieu, 1993]. The heterodox *vs.* orthodox script makes sense in established fields, where the resources at stake and the rules to get hold of them have been agreed upon. Existing fields are arenas of routine struggle over the control of these resources—even when the routine seems to consist of an endless streak of revolutions. *Manet* instead shows what it takes to create a new field, and Bourdieu's key move consists in identifying that creation with the rise of a collective belief in new standards of valuation. This fills a gap in Bourdieusian theory: in most accounts of empirical fields, by Bourdieu himself or by his own enthusiasts, fields are born of historical contingency. In fact this is an enduring blind spot of Bourdieu's work: it has no theory of the emergence of fields. *Manet* takes one step toward building that theory, by likening it to a theory of belief.

The move has several implications. It first means that the household concepts of field, habitus, or forms of capital take a backseat in the argument. For all its seeming familiarity, *Manet* is likely to tweak our perception of Bourdieu's contribution by showcasing his flair for charting the fresh territories of belief and value. These two key themes also make the book timely—in fact, a lot of the recent Bourdieu-inspired scholarship looks prematurely old in comparison. Reading *Manet*, it often feels as though Bourdieu were willing to bracket the Bourdieusian framework for a while and to treat himself to a direct dialogue with current sociological explorations of value and valuation. The arch-belief he posits as a requisite for the birth of a new field, for example, is strikingly reminiscent of the changing “moral background” Gabriel Abend uncovers behind different historical instantiations of the field of business ethics [Abend, 2014].

By working out the implications of his central insight, Bourdieu also renews the narrative of an important historical moment. New fields, because they arise from new beliefs, are likely to emerge in times of crisis and distrust. And indeed *Manet's* revolution broke against the backdrop of an old regime in crisis. The book here follows Harrison and Cynthia White's classic account of the collapse of the state-sponsored academic system [White and White, 1965], yet with a twist. For in Bourdieu's view the Academy's crisis was not chiefly a demographic one. It did not arise from the inability of the old system to reward the careers of an ever-growing number of aspiring artists. These demographic pressures instead undermined the very belief that the system could tell good art from bad. The crisis, in other words,

was a crisis of faith—an ideal circumstance for a would-be prophet, and a nice elaboration on the received narrative.

Manet's shortcomings, on the other hand, take on extra relief in light of the book's core insight. Bourdieu suggests that in the old system belief was maintained through the clear distinction between the artists that were chosen and the ones that were not. How did things work once the new field was established? Was a similar mechanism responsible for how faith in the new creed persisted? The book points in that direction, arguing that modern artists needed places for consecration, just like old academic ones had before them. But the reader wonders what these places were, and how exactly they delivered on their mission. This is all the more frustrating because a lingering question is that of the role of the market—stressed by the Whites—in the triumph of modern art. Did the market become a consecrating institution, as the Academy had been? How was consecration, with its almost sacred character, achieved in a mundane market setting? The religious analogy winds up feeling both omnipresent and somehow underexploited.

That the book seeks to ground a field-theoretical account of the rise of modern art on the study of a single individual finally highlights a weakness in Bourdieu's theory of cultural innovation and creative action. To achieve a symbolic revolution, one does not only need the position and circumstances to spread a new discourse. One also needs something to say. Where did Manet's novel ideas come from? Bourdieu has a distinct approach to why individuals are inclined to be innovative: their structural positions explain their aesthetic position-takings. But how do individuals actually come up with innovations? The book offers no mechanism for the origins of new ideas. In particular, it tends to obliterate the interpersonal relations and collaborations that made Manet's original painting possible. In a way, Bourdieu's insistence on the prophetic figure of Manet reasserts the vision of the creator as an inspired loner. The lack of a sociological take on innovation also precludes a reflection on the influence of the market on creativity. As Bourdieu acknowledges, and unlike the field of literature, the art field in that era was helped by the market on its journey toward emancipation from the Academy. What were the consequences of the development of the market for the work of artists? These are questions our current agenda would tend to put to the center of the reflection—and questions this book has few answers to. But it is accomplishment

enough that its contribution to a theory of value should still feel relevant today.

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