Against Bourdieu? Prizes, split systems, and explaining underrepresentation

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Abstract. When Pierre Bourdieu addresses the problem of why people from certain discriminated groups are hardly present in some fields, he emphasizes the role of stylistic factors that cannot be captured in terms of rules. An alternative explanation refers to split systems, both of which can be captured by means of rules.

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"Why are people from that ethnic minority background hardly present in this field – there are many of them in this country?" "Why are people from that class hardly present?" In response to such questions, Pierre Bourdieu is famous for emphasizing the role of stylistic factors (Moi 1991: 1020; Gell 1992: 272). These can include styles of conversation, styles of writing, and styles of dress. If one achieves the stylistic factors, success in the field is much easier. But Bourdieu seems against two appeals to rules in explaining how to achieve this. One explanation says that the people who achieve these stylistic qualities actually follow rules of style to do so, representing the rules in their mind. If you only knew the rules (and had appropriate talent), you could achieve these qualities too! Bourdieu thinks that actually they have a feel for appropriate stylistic moves (Bouveresse 1999). Another explanation says that one can represent the stylistic requirements in terms of rules to follow, even if people are often not meeting these by means of representing rules in their mind and following them. According to the standard Bourdieu-influenced approach, actually one cannot specify a set of rules for achieving a suitable style and achieving it is

easier if you come from a certain background.

Bourdieu and followers must deal with various rival hypotheses. One such hypothesis – very clunky and unsophisticated in comparison – is what I call split systems. We can illustrate it by reference to novels which count as literature, in a prestigious sense of the word – surely the hypothesis, or something like it, has already occurred to some widely read literary writers without the grandest prizes. Let us imagine that you desire to write a novel. Your ideal is as follows:

- The novel should be well-written at the level of sentences and structure, rather than a disorderly mess.

- It should feature well-rounded characters rather than simply archetypes or caricatures.

- It should have a decent plot, rather than no story whatsoever.

- It should gain some recognition by the literary establishment.

- It should appeal to a wider readership rather than to a handful of literary critics.

- It should have some long-term value for future readers.

Here is a potential problem: you encounter a split system. "We can specify rules which you can follow and that increases the chances of getting recognition from parts of the literary establishment, notably getting prizes. And we can specify rules that you can follow for writing a literary novel of interest to wider audiences – for success with that system. But it is humanly impossible to follow both sets of rules, and so to realize the ideal described."

Why would there be this split? There can be bad reasons and good reasons. I shall only focus on the bad! A bad reason is "We know that lots of newcomers to the

literary field will have this ideal you have described – they did well at school; they are not highly imbalanced types; they come from nice families, whom they would like to give something back to through their work. Such an ideal is entirely unsurprising. But we don't like most people with literary talent from other backgrounds. Thus we set up the prize-giving system so that they are probably going to have to make a choice, sacrificing some part of their ideal. And newcomers from such backgrounds are going to take a while to work this out, which favours people from our class. To begin with, the outsiders look at the prize-winning cases and are influenced by those, while foolishly also trying to capture the hearts of a wider readership – a project which probably ends with satisfying no one. The prize-winning cases are mostly not of wider interest: one (normally) only gives prizes to works which involve barriers towards taking any satisfaction from them." In this situation, the obstacles can be presented in terms of rule systems, contrary to Bourdieu. These rule systems make a normal ideal unrealizable, or else near impossible to realize. Explanations of Bourdieu pit his approach against an explanation which focuses on one rule system in isolation, rather than two incompatible ones. With two, underrepresentation can be explained without his complicated departures from rule-system explanations.

Appendix: captured in a saying?

I wonder whether there is someone who will ask, "Why can't I capture all this in a brief saying – 'please everyone, please no one'?" Our question is how far one can get in explaining underrepresentation by reference to rule systems. Does one need to depart significantly from such explanations, as Bourdieu does? The inadequacy of just appealing to the brief saying is partly because it does not tell us whether the failed

project of pleasing everyone failed because it was a project of trying to follow rules or not. It does not address the specific question we are addressing. An answer to our question is: there are a lot of tricks involving rule systems which insiders to a field can use to keep people out; one does not have to say or try to convey, "Your style is not quite our style, and it is impossible to explain what exactly the problem is."

References

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