Approaches to „Symbolic Revolutions“ in Art and Politics – Blog des Kulturwissenschaftlichen Instituts Essen (KWI-Blog)

blog.kulturwissenschaften.de/approaches-to-symbolic-revolutions-in-art-and-politics

Das Kulturwissenschaftliche Institut Essen (KWI) 22.04.2025

Approaches to „Symbolic Revolutions“ in Art and Politics What is at Stake for Public Sociology? Von: Ádám Havas

> There’s a famous remark by Andre Gide that ‘good sentiments make bad literature’; you might equally say that good sentiments make bad sociology. […] You don’t do sociology in order to enjoy yourself by suffering with those who suffer. […] The model that comes to mind here is Flaubert, someone who looks at reality with a distant gaze, who sees things with sympathy, but without letting himself be caught up in them.
>
> – Pierre Bourdieu[1]
>
> The aim of theory is not to be boringly right but brilliantly wrong.
>
> – Michael Burawoy[2]

The social logic of cultural change has long preoccupied both cultural historians and sociologists, particularly during periods when the “doxa” – the normative, ideological, and aesthetic standards taken for granted – undergoes rapid and profound transformations. Such periods of artistic, social, economic, and political upheaval often arise from struggles across various fields of cultural production[3], where competing visions of taste and value challenge the dominant structural order. To explore the possibilities and limitations of how the “neglected Bourdieusian concept”[4] of symbolic revolutions can be applied, I co-organized a workshop on the subject (with Paul Buckermann) at the Institute for Advanced Study in the Humanities (KWI Essen)[5], with invited guests Martin Petzke (Bielefeld University), Leon Gabriel (Ruhr University Bochum), and myself as both speaker and co-host. Drawing on examples from the fields of historical sociology and contemporary politics (Petzke), theatre/scenic arts (Gabriel), and contemporary avant-garde music (Havas), the workshop was an invitation to explore the underlying dynamics driving transformative shifts in social and artistic fields, as well as their consequences. Additionally, I offer some closing remarks on the usefulness of the notion “symbolic revolution” for the project of *public sociology*, inspired by Michael Burawoy (1947–2025)[6], whose tragic death in early February has shaken the global sociological community.

The "Pure" Theory of Symbolic Revolution

In fact, the idea for the event was inspired by Martin Petzke's seminal article, *Symbolic Revolutions: Mobilizing a Neglected Bourdieusian Concept for Historical Sociology*[7]. Petzke's opening lecture at KWI focused on the ideal-type of symbolic revolution distilled from Bourdieu's various works and its application to contemporary politics, as demonstrated by the recent election of Donald Trump. Petzke's theoretical exposé identified four major dimensions of an "ideal-typical" symbolic revolution: 1) the conciliation of opposites, 2) the "cleft habitus" of symbolic revolutionaries, 3) crises as catalysts of symbolic revolutions, and finally, 4) a return to canonical sources within the field. Since the first of these dimensions – "the conciliation of opposites" – was deemed most important, I provide a more detailed presentation of it, while only highlighting the essential aspects of the remaining three.

According to Bourdieu's constructivist structuralism, symbolic revolutions are characterized by the "reconciliation of opposites," meaning they resolve deep-seated divisions within a field by synthesizing two previously irreconcilable (op)positions. This dialectical process creates a new, dominant position that transforms the structure of authority and legitimacy. For instance, in art, Manet combined the classical techniques of the Académie with the subject matter of realism, breaking with both and creating something new. Similarly, Flaubert fused lyricism with realism in literature; Heidegger transcended neo-Kantianism with historicism in philosophy; Sartre, in the intellectual field, invented the "total intellectual," who was philosopher, critic, novelist, and dramatist at the same time; and Bourdieu himself, who aimed to overcome the divide between theoreticism and empiricism in social sciences.

The second aspect, "cleft habitus" relates to the revolutionary's unique or unconventional social dispositions or *habitus* constructs. Habitus, one of the most cited sociological concepts today, refers to a set of durable, unconscious dispositions, i.e., schemes of perception, appreciation, and action, and functions as an intermediary structure between the individual and structure making it sociologically possible to account for social change by connecting the micro, mezzo and macro levels of analysis. A cleft habitus arises when these dispositions conditioned by contrasting social worlds simultaneously, typically at sharp upwardly social mobility paths.[8] Petzke provides examples of this from his article, citing Flaubert and Manet, who were "neither bourgeois nor bohemian, but… instead both bourgeois and bohemian", breaking with the conventional careers expected of them despite coming from wealthy families. Heidegger's "improbable" and "exceptional social trajectory" – "traversing the social space from the 'lesser rural petty bourgeoisie' to the position of 'professor ordinarius'" – also furnished him with a "gift for making connections between problems that previously existed only in fragmentary form, scattered around the political and philosophical fields".

The third dimension, “Crises as catalysts of symbolic revolutions,” refers to external – political, demographic, economic – processes that change the internal rules of different fields, i.e., tensions that break “the immediate fit between the subjective structures and the objective structures”. Examples include the expansion of education, which caused an influx of students with varying social dispositions seeking political and artistic legitimacy, or the traumas of the German occupation in France during WWII, which created a “social demand for intellectual prophecy”, later fulfilled by Sartre. Finally, the “return to canonical sources” refers to the strategies of legitimation used by symbolic revolutionaries: To resolve tensions and occupy dominant positions within their respective fields, revolutionary innovators place themselves in historical continuity with canonical authors, reinterpreting the canon and imposing their subversive vision as legitimate.

Exploring Symbolic Revolutions Across Politics and the Arts

1. Donald Trump’s 2024 Reelection

To demonstrate the applicability of symbolic revolutions to contemporary politics, Petzke drew on the empirical case study of the 2025 (re)election of Donald Trump. To speak of symbolic revolutions in any field, there must be a fundamental tension that impacts the possible outcomes of actions or positions taken. In US politics, the fundamental opposition, argues Petzke, is between the Democrats’ focus on identity politics, which emphasizes disadvantaged minorities while shifting away from traditional working-class concerns, and the Republican position, which can be characterized as “meritocratic universalism” – an ideology that sees social inequality as a result of individual differences rather than structural factors, thereby legitimizing the “socioeconomic divide between white Americans and Americans of color”[9]. At the same time, the (white) working class economic marginalization especially in the electorally important “rust belt” areas, rejected both liberal identity politics of the Democrats and the and the “meritocratic universalism” of the Republicans. According to Petzke:

> it preserved elements of both opposites. It merged the laissez-faire racism of the right that tacitly condones structural advantages of whites and the politics of redress of the left into a ‘white identity politics’.[10]

In other words, through the Bourdieusian lenses, the invention of an ultra-right wing identity politics where the white position is presented as that of the victim can be understood according to the logic of symbolic revolutions, especially concerning Trump’s “cleft habitus” being representant of “new money” and his recourse to an imagined golden epoch when “America was great” which echoes illiberal regimes ethnonationalist politics in postsocialist East-Central Europe:

> More importantly, perhaps, he cast his politics of white grievance in the canonical rhetoric of civil rights, championing the 'forgotten men and women' and tacitly aligning himself with the foundational idea of an incremental realization of equality in an ever-more perfect union. In so doing, he subverted a progressive agenda of minority rights in the name of minority rights, just as Manet employed techniques of the canonical masters against the guardians of the canon and just as Heidegger attacked neo-Kantians in the name of Kantianism.[11]

2. Scenic Arts and Social Movements

The second presenter, Leon Gabriel, examined the aesthetics of scenic arts in relation to political issues, describing change and transformation from the perspective of theatre studies. A key topic of Gabriel's talk was the politicization of art especially with regards to non-Eurocentric disruptive epistemologies, social movements and humanitarian struggles. According to his critical proposition:

> The question of whether something is 'good art' or even art at all does not help us understand contemporary artistic works.[12]

To illustrate his point, he drew on case studies linked the staging of revolutions. The first example was the Swiss director's Milo Rau's staging of the storming of the Reichstag building as part of his project *General Assembly* "inspired by the 1920 mass staging by Nikolai Evreinov St. Petersburg Winter Palace by the Russian Revolution of 1917 as a propagandistic stylization". These productions aim to merge the assembly and its representation into a sovereign entity, where the masses become "the subject of their own representation". Gabriel also contrasted artistic representations of revolution with real-life political events, such as the 2021 storming of the US Capitol and Bolsonaro supporter's storming of the Brazilian Parliament, noting that while both seek to monumentalize the act and become an image, right-wing populist movements reject democratic representation in favor of direct action "on the world stage of history", an observation that echoes Walter Benjamin's distinction between the "aestheticization of politics" and the "politicization of aesthetics".

Following an exploration of Brecht's innovations in representation as a socially situated process, Gabriel concludes by referencing Bini Adamczak's theory of "ways of relating", which analyzes the qualities of relationships within revolutions, shifting away from utopian ideals toward an understanding of specific relational networks. This approach aligns with the contemporary shift in the scenic arts toward exploring social practices rather than focusing on whether something qualifies as "art".

3. Free Improvisation and Symbolic Revolutions

Finally, my talk titled *Homage to Dionysius: Free Improvisation and Symbolic Revolutions* used free improvisation as a main case based on my empirical research in East Central Europe (Budapest), and Southwestern Europe (Barcelona) to demonstrate the certain limits of Bourdieu's conceptualization of artistic revolutions when confronted with contemporary avant-garde. Free improvisation, also known as creative, spontaneous, or real-time music, is celebrated for its utopian qualities and aesthetic radicalism. Often positioned at the fringes of "legitimate culture", this movement has served as the "ultimate avant-garde" since the 1960s – a dynamic space for experimentation, collective risk-taking, and unrestrained creative flow. While scholarship has primarily focused on Western – mainly US and West European – trends, the movement is deeply shaped by the local characteristics of geoculturally diverse urban scenes, offering a lens to explore postcolonial Europe's sonic landscape within and beyond the Black Atlantic.

I tried to make the case that free improvisation manifests a unique form of "aesthetic disobedience" by creating experimental laboratories for rethinking the relationship between aesthetics and ethics in multi-ethnic urban contexts. Furter, it represents a radical shift from what may be called "idiomatic" music (music making based on genre traditions and musical "idioms" such as bebop) while being shaped by local musical and sonic sensibilities. This is part of the reason why it is rarely consecrated by dominant institutions as the Bourdieusian model would suggest. The comparison of scenes from *postimperial* East Central and *postcolonial* Southwestern Europe served to provide a unique *transperipheral* vantage point on how musicians and audiences in Europe co-create social meanings through real time improvisation. I concluded by problematizing the concept of "improvisation" not only as an artistic practice but as a fundamental aspect of inter-ethnic collaboration and social mobility, and argued about its relevance as countercultural practice in a time when the combined forces of post-fascism and algorithmic capitalism threaten vulnerable social groups often racialized as "others". The detailed ethnographic study of DIY practices in various urban scenes demonstrates how alternative models of collaboration and conflict are being developed, which may be theorized as a distinct form of anarchism, one that rejects rigid institutional frameworks, academic orthodoxy, commercial market imperatives, technocratic cultural policies, and the (neo)liberal identity politics shaped by moral geopolitical and ideological stakes. I closed by proposing an understanding of free improvisation as a "Dionysian spirit", offering an utopistic counterpoint to the discontents of neoliberal racial capitalism, even if it is often confined to the fleeting moment of performance.

The questions and comments highlighted critical dimensions where the "pure theory" of symbolic revolution may be further refined. For example, a participant asked about "limit" of certain fields stressing that in the globalized era it is hard to draw clear lines about what could be conceived as the "global intellectual field" (which is partly related to the competing definitions of what is an intellectual). Another question highlighted the temporality of symbolic revolutions, posing the seemingly simple inquiry of what happens

after “reconciling the irreconcilable”. It also questioned whether, within such a globalized context, it is still possible to speak of authoritative “revolutionary” individuals – who, in Bourdieu’s examples, are all male figures such as Sartre, Heidegger, Flaubert, Manet, or Bourdieu himself.

Closing Remarks: Symbolic Revolution and Public Sociology

Michael Burawoy has made significant contributions to sparking a discourse on public sociology, an activity intended to “engage multiple publics in multiple ways”[13]. The need for such engagement arises from the widening gap between the public and professionals (often filled by “instant-thinker” commentators and analysts) and sociology’s commitment to siding with the oppressed – rooted in its critical historical foundations. While I agree with criticisms[14] of Burawoy’s typology of sociological knowledge (professional, policy, critical, public), I find it essential to highlight what Burawoy’s eleventh thesis refers to as the “Sociologist as a Partisan”, particularly in its role in safeguarding civil society, especially vulnerable groups. The question of “what’s at stake for public sociology?” in relation to symbolic revolution can be understood as how an abstract theoretical concept, designed to grasp and model radical social change, can be useful or even pragmatic. This is not a rhetorical question, as sociology can be viewed as a “martial art” (the title of a documentary on Pierre Bourdieu and a subsequent collection of his political writings)[15] whose social function is self-defense due to its capacity to equip the oppressed with knowledge of their oppression and to endow them with a relational knowledge of the rules of the game or the various force fields they are situated in.

In the arts, for instance, understanding “symbolic revolutions” may help artists reconsider the relationship between aesthetic and political radicalism, as well as distinguish aesthetic innovation from speculative formalism, particularly in the contemporary avant-garde. In politics, this concept might shed light on the “market of ideological goods”, helping to overcome the opposition between illiberal/post-fascist and liberal identity politics, and understanding the type of “social prophecy” in demand, by whom, and for what purpose. For academics, I believe that a more direct engagement with this concept could foster creative approaches to transcending the opposition between “pure science” and “social activism”, something that is desperately needed as academia faces the intertwined forces of neoliberalism and illiberalism.[16]

References

1. Krais, Beate (1991): “Meanwhile, I have come to know all the diseases of sociological understanding” – An interview with Pierre Bourdieu, in: Pierre Bourdieu, Jean-Claude Chamboredon and Jean-Claude Passeron (eds.): The Craft of Sociology: Epistemological Preliminaries, Berlin/New York: de Gruyter, pp. 247–260, https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110856460.247.

2. Burawoy, Michael (ed.) (2012): Introduction: From Manchester to Berkeley by Way of Chicago, in: The Extended Case Method: Four Countries, Four Decades, Four Great Transformations, and One Theoretical Tradition, Oakland: University of California Press.
3. Bourdieu, Pierre (1994): The Field of Cultural Production. New York: Columbia University Press.
4. Petzke, Martin (2022): Symbolic Revolutions: Mobilizing a Neglected Bourdieusian Concept for Historical Sociology, in: Theory and Society, vol. 51, pp. 487–510, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11186-021-09467-9.
5. Workshop: Symbolic Revolutions (2025), on: Kulturwissenschaftliches Institut Essen [https://www.kulturwissenschaften.de/veranstaltung/workshop-symbolic-revolutions/] (Last Access: 19.03.2025).
6. In Memoriam: Michael Burawoy, on: UC Berkeley Sociology Department [https://sociology.berkeley.edu/memoriam-michael-burawoy], 06/02/2025 (Last Access: 06.03.2025).
7. Petzke 2022. Note that this section draws on the subchapter *Symbolic revolution – an ideal-type*, pp. 490–498.
8. This is perfectly illustrated by Didier Eribon's *Returning to Reims*, an autobiographical sociological novel about the author's upward mobility as a homosexual man born into a working-class family who rises to the intellectual elite of Paris. For a thorough discussion of Bourdieu's habitus concept see Hadas, Miklós (2022): Outlines of a Theory of Plural Habitus. New York: Routledge. On social mobility and habitus, see further: Durst, Judith and Ábel Bereményi (2024): False promises and distinct minority mobility paths: trajectories and costs of the education-driven social mobility of racialized ethnic groups, in: Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education, vol. 54, no. 3, pp. 355–367, https://doi.org/10.1080/03057925.2024.2321862.
9. Petzke 2022, p. 505.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid, p. 506.
12. I thank Gabriel for sharing with me confidentially the transcription of his talk. Quotations in my summary are extracted from his text.
13. Burawoy, Michael (2005): 2004 American sociological association presidential address: For public sociology, in: The British Journal of Sociology, vol. 56, no.2, pp. 259–294, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-4446.2005.00059.x.
14. Hadas, Miklós (2007): Much Ado About Nothing? Remarks on Michael Burawoy's Presidential Address, in*:* American Sociologist, vol. 38, pp. 309–322, https://doi.org/10.1007/s12108-007-9013-y.

15. Bourdieu, Pierre (2010): Sociology is a Martial Art: Political Writings, ed. Gisèle Sapiro, New York: The New Press. See also the documentary A Sociologia é um Esporte de Combate (Multi-Legendas), on: YouTube [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PFejoCxHA0w&ab_channel=LutasSimb%C3%B3licas], 22/10/2015 (Last Access: 06.03.2025).
16. Havas, Ádám and Ágoston Fáber (2020): The Rise of Heteronomous Academia on the EU's Borderlands, on: LeftEast [https://lefteast.org/heteronomous-academia-eu-borderlands], 19/08/2020 (Last Access: 06.03.2025).

SUGGESTED CITATION: Havas, Ádám: Approaches to "Symbolic Revoultions" in Art and Politics. What is at Stake for Public Sociology?, in: KWI-BLOG, [https://blog.kulturwissenschaften.de/approaches-to-symbolic-revolutions-in-art-and-politics/], 22.04.2025

DOI: https://doi.org/10.37189/kwi-blog/20250422-0830