

The Promise of Pierre Bourdieu's Social Theories of Practice for the Field of Homiletics

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Abstract

The relationship between the field of homiletics and the practice of preaching is complex. This paper explores how Pierre Bourdieu's social theories of practice might shine light upon the work of homileticians as they wrestle with their identity as observers of practice. Social theories of practice can provide helpful aid for a homiletical field searching for helpful methods of observation. Specifically, social theories of practice encourage observers to attend to the complex ways in which human agency and institutional supra-structure meet in practice.

In my daily life, I find myself regularly explaining what exactly it means to be a homiletician. The pithiest explanation I have is this: homileticians are not preachers; they are critical observers of preaching. I go on to explain that the task of homiletics is to make sense of the practice of preaching in order to aid those who have to climb into the pulpit each week. The work of homiletics can be invaluable for preachers, but we should not mistake these two roles. Lest we homileticians think too highly of ourselves, many fine preachers have led faithful and transformative ministries without the aid of homiletical theory. Many preachers have an innate understanding of the practice of preaching that is more sophisticated than what is made explicit in essays and

monographs. The practicing preacher can operate independently of us homileticians, but homileticians are dependent on the practicing preacher. Such is the nature of academic fields that call for observation—they always operate at the pleasure of the observed. And yet, homiletics differs from its observational siblings by also hoping to aid the practitioner in her practice. As a practical theological discipline, homiletics offers description *and* prescription. In recent years, the prescriptive task of homiletics has become more humble and careful, lest we continue to perpetuate the normative patterns of the powerful; but the prescriptive portion of our task remains.

I foreground the relationship of homiletics and preaching here in order to signal the trepidation I bring when reflecting upon the prompt of this edition of *Practical Matters*, “Worship, Ritual, and Theory.” The relationship of homiletical theory and preaching practice is complex. On the one hand, theory in the hands of some homileticians can obscure the dependent nature of the field of homiletics by creating secret languages known only by members of the academic community. In an attempt to wrest power from the observed subject, the observer creates special knowledge that promises to be essential to successful preaching. Using knowledge as capital, homileticians thus upend the relationship of observer and observed. Theory is then sold to preachers hoping for some special insight about how to grow a church, fix the world, or save a soul. And yet, on the other hand, homiletics cannot operate without theory. Even as the field of homiletics has grown to be more descriptive, these descriptions are codified and organized according to particular abstracted criteria. What counts as “important” to mention in a description is guided by an operating (and often tacit) theory. Theory is the necessary analytic tool that helps makes sense of the complex configuration of action in the world. Thus, in a field like homiletics that aims toward explanatory conclusions about the nature or consequence of preaching, theory is indispensable.

This essay is an attempt to offer up a single particular theory of practice that I believe is helpful for the field of homiletics. Notice that I do not say that this theory is helpful for preachers—at least not in the form below. Ideally, social theories of practice will ultimately aid preachers, but for the purposes of this paper, I envision my audience as fellow homileticians. This paper is an internal discussion about how we might become better observers of preaching with the aid of social theories of practice.

Toward this end, I will begin this paper with a short overview of Pierre Bourdieu’s social theories of practice. While Bourdieu is not the only person thinking and writing about practice, he is among the most read and cited practice thinkers and serves as the bedrock for many recent practice theories. I will then discuss how Bourdieu’s social theories of practice might provide a sense of caution for the field of homiletics, especially as it continues to take seriously the effects of social fields upon the preached word. Finally, while social theories of practice urge carefulness in our homiletical observation and descriptions of preaching, they also hold tremendous value for the field of homiletics. I will end this paper with descriptions of the types of promise this field holds for our work as homileticians.

“We’re talkin’ about Practice:” A Description of Bourdieu’s Social Theories of Practice.

As an introductory note, I should confess that there is no single unified social theory of practice.¹ In her seminal article written in 1984, “Theory in Anthropology since the Sixties,” Sherry Ortner noted that the cultural turn within anthropology was influenced by a new group of “practice thinkers” who sought to “explain the relationship(s) that obtain between human action, on the one hand, and some global entity which we may call ‘the system’ on the other.”² While Ortner’s definition is still appropriate for our purposes here, the field of practice theory is widening with each passing year.³ With the field of “practice” expanding at such a rapid rate, it is hard to describe a common denominator sufficient to all theories of practice. I cannot define practice with the same confidence as Ortner could when the field was still nascent. As such, I have chosen to use the field’s most prolific and influential thinker, Bourdieu, to help delineate rough boundaries for what we can call social theories of practice.⁴

Bourdieu, and his practice theory, is primarily interested in exposing the complex relationship of agency and structure as mutually constituted and influential.⁵ Human agency and institutional structures are inextricably tied together, dancing a never-ending cultural tango. Bourdieu’s work is an attempt to construct a theoretical schema that binds both agency and structure together as a relational whole, where agency and structure are two interlocking and inextricable dimensions of one social reality.⁶

In contrast to the traditional antinomy of agency and structure, Bourdieu devises a logic of practice that assesses strategic humans as they are both structured by the wider culture and structuring the wider culture. Bourdieu argues that the relationship between agency and structure is not at heart oppositional, but rather *dialectical*. Moreover, the dialectical character of social action can be observed in all its complexity when viewed through the lens of practices.

So what exactly is practice? Bourdieu explains his vision of practice as an equation: “(habitus+ capital) x field= Practice.”⁷ Practice is the formal interlocking relationship of three ideas: habitus, capital, and field. Habitus is the set of bodily dispositions and actions handed down to the actor by history, structuring the present and influencing future sets of practices. This twin nature of habitus is important. Habitus both sets up boundaries of what constitutes practice while concomitantly allowing the actor to engage freely in that practice in accord with their own particular interests. Put another way, habitus is “the durably installed generative principle of regulated improvisation.”⁸ Bourdieu uses the concept of habitus to knock a hole through the old antinomies of the individual and the social, the objective and the subjective, and the agent and the structure. Habitus links the individual and the social by positing that while the content of the life of any individual is unique, the social structure that she inhabits is shared.⁹ In other words, “to speak of habitus is to assert that the individual, and even the personal, the subjective is social, collective. Habitus is socialized subjectivity.”¹⁰ The actor, in a given field, is always assessing the possible avenues of action and the power necessary to achieve the ends of their own interest. Habitus presses the actor to ask, “is this possible for someone like me?”

Connected to this issue of power and possibility is Bourdieu's conception of capital. Capital is that which can be exchanged in order to achieve the interest of the actor. Bourdieu argues that the notion of capital is necessary if we are to understand the structuring force of the social world.¹¹ Bourdieu's vision of practice widens the Marxist vision of capital to encompass the different symbolic assets that are exchanged and the different goods and services that these assets might procure. Social networks, past accomplishments, and particular skills are valuable capital in the right context. For Bourdieu, everyone is a cultural capitalist. All actors are capital holders of some sort and seek a return on the investment of their capital.¹²

And yet, capital does not find value independent of a market. Capital needs an arena where its value is stable and competition for that capital is constant. Bourdieu describes such a place as the field. While habitus describes the social relationship of agency and structure, Bourdieu's conception of "field" provides a framework for observing the dynamics of a particular context.¹³ The field for Bourdieu is where the struggle for capital takes place and where capital is exchanged. It is the social setting in which habitus operates and acts. The field is like a playing field where competition takes place according to a set of rules. The competitors on the field are interested in improving their place, their position and their chances of besting their opponent. At stake in this game is capital.¹⁴ Actors use the available strategies afforded to them in their habitus to gain their individual interests within a specific field.

For Bourdieu, practices are thus the result of a socialized individual competing for capital in a specific field. At the center of this vision is a dialectical relationship of the past and present. Practices are not simply the product of the past, but neither do they spring fully-grown from our present imaginations. Habitus does not control the practice; nor does the field create practice. Rather, practice grows out of the relationship of these two factors in the pursuit of capital. Practices are both the product of history and the producer of history. Moreover, practice is the locus of observation that can provide deep insight into how socialized individuals pursue their interest in particular fields. When we observe practice we are observing culture as it creates and is created.

The Cautions of Practice Theory for the Field of Homiletics:

Having provided a brief overview of Bourdieu's vision of practice, let us turn to two principal warnings that Bourdieu's social theories of practice might offer the field of homiletics: 1) a caution against pre-packaged observational methods; 2) a caution against romantic notions of change.

1. A WARNING AGAINST PRE-PACKAGED OBSERVATIONAL METHODS

As homileticians continue to take seriously social human action as the starting point for homiletics, they will need to wrestle with the complex ways the sermon and preacher operate within the congregational field. While homiletics is interested in the practice of preaching, the practice

of preaching as locally constructed can only be understood within the complex configuration of other local practices. Bracketing out preaching as the only site of observation will produce anemic pictures of preaching and shallow prescriptive content. Bourdieu complicates our visions of preaching by complicating our vision of practice. Preaching is a single practice in field full of practices that are being employed towards various ends depending on the interests of the actor. What the preacher says is not the same as what the congregation hears and how the congregation reacts to the sermon is not, in the end, a reaction only to the sermon. Tracing the consequence of a single sermon is difficult. The temptation in such a wild and woolly reality is to, on the one hand, locate a set of pre-formed operative rules that guide action within the field or, on the other hand, claim that each person governs their own life independently of the shared system. Bourdieu is unsatisfied with either descriptions of operative rules or of lone wolf actors. Instead, Bourdieu asks the observer to discern the operating practical logic of the field that makes individual choices understandable given the boundaries and hierarchies of the field. To complicate matters even more, Bourdieu argues that a method to discern such a practical logic needs to be built anew in each research context.

Bourdieu maintains that the social order has a “practical logic” that can be observed. This logic is intrinsic to the field itself. Practical reason is constituted and produced amid the interrelationship of habitus and field. An observer can observe and predict, but actors will break finely tuned rules. Practical actions are not a result of a state of mind or a regulated structure. Practice is the regulated improvisation of an actor within a field. The practical sense that ultimately constitutes culture is not governed by rules and cannot be understood by a single sociological theory or normative anthropology. For Bourdieu, practical sense has its own internal logic until the logical ceases to be practical.¹⁵ Thus, the “peculiar difficulty of sociology . . . is to produce a precise science of an imprecise, fuzzy, woolly reality. For this it is better that its concepts be polymorphic, supple, and adaptable, rather than defined, calibrated and used rigidly.”¹⁶

Bourdieu is a pragmatic methodological pluralist who contends that methods are helpful only so far as they fit the problem at hand. Moreover, these methods must be reflected upon *in actu* as they are deployed to answer particular questions. Theory is thus called upon to aid in asking the right questions at the right time. In this way, theory and method are both vital for social research. Practical research and theoretical construction are not simply close conversation partners; they are fused together in a single operation. For Bourdieu, theory and method interpenetrate each other entirely. Every act of research is simultaneously empirical (it confronts the world of observable phenomena) and theoretical (it necessarily engages hypotheses about the underlying structures of relations that observations are designed to capture). Even the most minute empirical operation—the scale of measurement, a coding decision, the construction of an indicator, or the inclusion of an item in a questionnaire—involves theoretical choices, conscious or unconscious, while the most abstract conceptual puzzle cannot be fully clarified without systematic engagement with empirical reality.¹⁷

The history of homiletics is filled with attempts to discern the effect of the sermon on the listening congregation. The homiletical “turn to the listener” is an attempt to aid the preacher in making sense of the common characteristics that bind together the listening congregation.¹⁸ To this end, homiletics has either turned to disciplines like philosophy, anthropology, and rhetoric to provide normative descriptions of congregations or created empirical studies of the listening congregation.¹⁹ While this scholarship can provide preachers with broad contours of what their congregation might experience in a sermon and help birth questions to ask a local context, the research cannot provide a detailed description of the unique practical logic of the congregational field. Even if one was willing to admit a broadly construed common experience that might bind preacher and congregation, common experience only finds expression in the unique logic of the field.²⁰ Broad homiletical descriptions of congregations generally describe the patterns of listeners independent of the complex network of practices that surround the sermon.²¹ How people make sense of their world and what animates their interest is a question to be asked from within the field not independent of the field.

A fine example of a method built from within the field is Mary McClintock Fulkerson’s work, *Places of Redemption: Theology for a Worldly Church*. In this fascinating book, Fulkerson re-frames the discipline of practical theology as a study of the practices of faith within a contemporary situation. Spending two and half years at The Good Samaritan Church in North Carolina, Fulkerson observes how the complex pattern of actions, commitments, and bodies create and sustain the complex “place” of the congregation. To this end, Fulkerson observes a wide network of practices at the church and traces their intersection. The worship practices of the church do not operate independently of the homemaking practices of the church and a shift in one will produce a shift in the other. Fulkerson’s work makes clear that how a congregation hears a sermon is related to a host of other practices that are interrelated and mutually constitutive.

Methodologically, Fulkerson finds a starting place for her ethnographic research at the site of a “wound,” that is, the place in the field that is generating questions of action, identity, and commitment. The wound is a place of disjuncture where the practices that generally work together are working toward different ends. Hidden interests are made manifest at the site of the wound, and the interests inherent in practices are laid bare. In this way, the context dictates the starting place of the research. Allowing the congregational field to dictate the starting point for research is a frightening prospect for homiletical research. After all, what if the wound is not immediately related to the preaching event? Yet, this is precisely the point. To limit observation simply to the occasion of the sermon is to miss how the sermon fits into the practical logic of the field and how it operates among the congregation. The congregational field is complex and full of conflicting interest and competing habitus. Within such a complex environment a homiletician will need to be open to a flexible improvisatory research agenda. Research strategies that start at the wounds of the congregation may seem far away from the preaching act, but if the preaching event is an influential part of the field then it will reveal its influence within the network of practices.

2. A WARNING AGAINST ROMANTIC NOTIONS OF CHANGE

Perhaps the most distressing claim of Bourdieu's social theories of practice is how little power is available to change the field. This is especially distressing to homileticians who are trying to provide prescriptive ideas for practice. Practice theory disrupts our simple schemes for changing the social order.

Homileticians have generally argued that changing the symbols within the social order will change the social order.²² And yet, Bourdieu is pessimistic that anyone has the power to change anything, let alone entrenched social symbols. Bourdieu is clear that symbols are consistently used as instruments of domination. Symbolic systems within a field (re)produce stratified and political hierarchies of dominant and subordinate people groups. Moreover, these systems of domination work most affectively when they are hidden from the view of the actors. Hierarchies of power are best preserved when the social order seems self-evident to all involved, especially the subordinate actors in a field. Bourdieu explains that the idea of a freely choosing individual is an ideological construct created by bourgeois elite as a way to oppress those with a narrower field of opportunities. In reality, few people have the opportunity to freely choose very much. The default mode of habitus is reproduction. If there is no one there to notice the structures of domination then domination will continue to reproduce itself *ad infinitum*.

In general, the worldly circumstances of human action are under no inevitable obligation to conform to the categories by which certain people perceive them.²³ And yet, for all the potential for change, Bourdieu sees little effective change coming from subordinated groups in a field. If change happens in a field it is usually because the dominant group in the field has shifted into a more advantageous position of power. Bourdieu is frank when he observes that it is those agents from privileged backgrounds who will be best equipped to notice the shifting sands of the field and recognize the desirability of the new more advantageous field position. He writes, "In a general manner, it is the people who are richest in economic capital, cultural capital, and social capital who are the first to head for new positions."²⁴ The dominant are in a special place to recognize the value of a gap produced by the shifting field and they will move into that gap allowing the subordinate to take their former place.

So can preaching change anything? I argue yes, but homileticians will need to operate with a more complex vision of preaching's instrumental function. Homiletical theories of the past forty years have become more strategic in their attempts to change the oppressive social order within which congregations operate. Critical theory and liberation theology have emboldened homiletics to maximize the instrumental power of the sermon so that the preached word might expose the oppressive practices of this world and usher in alternative communities of equality of freedom. As Christine Smith notes, in recent years homileticians have been urging "students to learn how to craft their sermons in ways that invite individuals and whole communities into experiences, into

meaning, into truth, into holy encounters that will leave people nourished and changed.”²⁵ The hope for change remains an important homiletical goal and a distinct homiletical problem, especially in light of Bourdieu’s social theories of domination and subordination.

To take seriously Bourdieu’s bleak vision of change requires not simply thinking about how preaching can reframe the social symbolic order of the field, but *when* it ought to try. Liberation homiletics have provided a vision of preaching where subversive proclamation exposes the powers of the world so that an alternative reality might take its place.²⁶ An urgency has gripped homiletics so that preaching has become part of larger strategies of social change, and yet, the field has not grappled with the ways in which social change is a delicate combination of action and time.

French social theorist Michel de Certeau argues that Bourdieu’s vision of social change does not account for the ways organized efforts of social change actually do change the social order. Certeau agrees with Bourdieu that objective structures determine particular action and that such objective structures hold a largely invisible influence on practice. What Certeau is unwilling to admit is that those structures necessarily remain invisible to the actor and that the weak are powerless to change the system. For Certeau, cultural understanding is available to an actor within a field, and this understanding can lead to the creation of specific tactics that change the cultural field when they are employed at the right time. That is, images can be manipulated, words can be reemployed, and practices can be altered toward different ends.²⁷

Certeau witnessed a powerful model for change in the 1968 student riots in Paris. From his post in the French academy, Certeau noticed how, in a parallel to the earlier storming of the Bastille, the student revolution “captured speech”; that is, it took existing signs and symbols and inverted their sense toward different ends.²⁸ The symbolic equilibrium that seems so untouchable in Bourdieu’s vision of culture was rocked and altered by the practices of the student protestors. Certeau recognized that social change is not only possible but can be initiated by intentional action. For Certeau, turns, detours, subversions, conversions, and inversions of practices can insinuate a different reality and alternative way of being.²⁹ The practices that reconsider the symbolic currency of the culture and subvert the interests of the powerful he calls tactics. Certeau is not interested in simply mapping the complex system of power and discipline, but in discovering how cultures and societies resist the determining forces of the powerful through the use of tactical action.³⁰

Tactics, argues Certeau, operate without territory but with an acute sense of timing. Tactics utilize time to subvert the strategies that create a place. Tactics claim no universal or atemporal effectiveness, but gather what is available and wait for the right time to employ what is at immediately at hand. Tactics seize the moment when the moment is most amenable to change. To say that tactics focus on the right time is to also argue that tactics are conditioned by an alternative sense of time. Tactics are a result of an imagination that recognizes that time betrays stasis. Given enough time, even the most powerful empires will fall. Given enough “right moments,” the tactical can chip away at the reproductive force of culture and produce change. The field of homiletics has asked strategic questions about how a new social symbolic order might be ushered into the world without asking tactical questions about when we usher in a new social symbolic order.

To ask the question “when?” is to begin to think tactically. A tactical homiletic recognizes that proclamation finds its power not only in its content, but also in the unique moment of performance. Tactical homiletics thus aids preachers in their *kairos* preaching, in which the sermon is calibrated according to both the pervading social place of the congregation *and* the present configuration of the social order at the time of the preaching moment. In their book, *Kairos Preaching*, David Schnasa Jacobsen and Robert Allen Kelly describe a *kairos* homiletic as an attempt to calibrate the relationship of context, situation, and gospel. Compare this conception of preaching to Christine Smith who describes the preaching moment as the convergence of the world of the preacher, the world of the community, and the larger social context.³¹ Smith brackets time out of her description of preaching, assuming a static person, community and context. But people, communities, and contexts are not static but are always changing and shifting. For Jacobsen and Kelly, preaching does not occur independently of time, but occurs in time. Preaching is proclamation of God’s promises at the right particular moment.³² Jacobsen and Kelly’s work inaugurates the beginnings of a tactical homiletic where preaching aims to be the gospel calibrated for the community, the context, and the preacher at a specific time.

The Promise of Practice Theories for the Field of Homiletics:

Having noted the ways in which Bourdieu’s theories of practice caution our work as homiletics, let me briefly mention two ways in which practice theory might inform our work as homiletics.

I. A CALL FOR REFLEXIVE PRACTICES IN OUR WORK

Above I noted that Bourdieu refuses to prescribe a single set of methodological principles for research. And yet, there is a single methodological principle that Bourdieu does require of all methods of observation: reflexivity. Bourdieu is not opposed to drawing conclusions from the data gathered or calling upon social theory to help interpret data. Yet, due to the fuzzy nature of reality, sociological conclusions and theories must always be subject to a corresponding reflexive epistemic observation. Reflexivity is an indispensable part of observation. From his early observation of the Algerians to his comprehensive account of the French Academy, Bourdieu has both analyzed the culture at hand and has leveraged sociological theories to understand that culture. Bourdieu is very aware that his own sociological emphasis on the use of power will necessarily include attention to how the researcher exercises power as an observer and an intellectual who orders data into a coherent picture. Put another way, Bourdieu is constantly asking himself, “how can one practice a social science—itsself a symbolic enterprise—and yet not reproduce the effects of social distinction?”³³ If all fields are constituted by power relations and all actions, even social scientific action, are interested, then how does one construct a social science method that will prevent introducing yet another agent into the ongoing struggle for power?³⁴

Bourdieu is concerned that while anthropology and sociology have provided avenues and methods for participant observation, they have not provided a subsequent mandate for “participant objectivation.”³⁵ Bourdieu is clear that the best practices of observation presuppose and imply a radical self-criticism. Practice theory mandates the objectivization of she who objectivizes. Bourdieu is not satisfied that “participant observation” is the only task of the observer. Instead he calls for a method that analyzes both the object and the observing subject’s relation to that object. This method opens an extra lane of epistemological traffic. Bourdieu recognizes that the observer is not an innocent bystander in the method but is herself an interested party struggling for power.

But Bourdieu goes further than his sociological predecessors when he calls for a reflexive check both on social location and on field location. Social location is always mediated by the position the agent holds in a specific field of cultural production. Bourdieu argues that most sociology is content with only discussing the social location of the observer, and therefore committing the “short-circuit fallacy.”³⁶ That is, the reflexive move establishes a direct link between very distant objects (the observer’s social location and the observed field and habitus) without recognizing that mediation of these distant objects is influenced by a social space of cultural production. This subspace provides boundaries and logic that ultimately influence and shape the way in which the social location is mediated in the observer. Bourdieu writes, “This subspace is yet a social space with its own logic, within which agents struggle over stakes of a particular kind and pursue interests that can be quite disinterested from the standpoint of the stakes in currency in the larger social universe.”³⁷ Put plainly, the observer must contend not only with her own social location, but also with the field that is influencing the rationale for observing the object in the first place. Reflexivity is a call to examine our social location, our field location, and the epistemic presuppositions that are built into our own practices of observation. The instruments of analysis (questionnaires, qualitative interviews, etc.), operations of research (interview coding, plotting, and fieldwork note taking, etc.), and the organizing principles of data (habitus, semiotics, capital, etc.) require their own moment of observation.

In short, it is not enough to reflexively examine one’s self, or one’s field, but the observer must also learn to “objectify the intention of objectifying.”³⁸ Homiletics are called to make conclusions not only about preachers and congregations, but about their own world that sponsors the observation. Bourdieu calls all observers to “work at excluding from scientific objectification everything that it might owe to the ambition to dominate by means of the weapons of science.”³⁹ Here we get to the heart of Bourdieu’s vision of reflexivity. Observers are tasked with looking deep within their own lives and observing the biases that come with being educated. Moreover, they observe a practice of asking critical questions of a group of people who may not be asking those

same questions. The observer must beware of the inherent elitism that comes with a scholastic view that privileges the epistemic values of observers and uses epistemic distinction to maintain power differentials.

Practically speaking, I would like to see this type of reflexivity appear in the discipline of homiletics in two ways. First, I hope that homiletical works would take greater care to describe the methods of observations used in the description and assessment of preaching. Biographical information, critical rationales of method and backward critiques of homiletical conclusions would be a welcomed addition to our homiletical work. In this respect, the work of homiletician and ethicist Ted Smith is a welcomed example. Smith's work, *The New Measures: A Theological History of Democratic Practice*, takes great care to describe the method of observation of historical preaching materials while also admitting its limitations. Smith is careful not to claim universal applicability of his own method but provides a strong rationale for its use based upon the subject matter and his intentions.⁴⁰ Second, I would welcome an academic ombudsman whose work is designed to better understand and describe the field of homiletics. In anthropology, James Clifford's work, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* is devoted to understanding the field of anthropology as it operates in the world and in the academy. Similarly, Bourdieu's work *Homo Academicus* is a field study of the French Académie during the middle part of the last century. Both Clifford and Bourdieu provide critical, reflexive descriptions of the field of which they are a part. Their reflexive observation of observers is designed to create a more stable foundation for academic research by recognizing the various biases and prejudices of the observer that might hinder observation. Pure objectivity will never be achieved, but Bourdieu and Clifford recognize that reflexivity can provide a clearer picture of the practices in an opaque field and the practices of an opaque observer.

2. A CALL FOR GREATER ATTENTION TO HISTORY

Finally, Bourdieu's social theories of practice can aid homiletics in retrieving history as a legitimate site of homiletical research. The practice approach of Bourdieu sees the separation of cultural research and history as severely misguided. Specifically, research sciences that attempt to apprehend people in pure synchrony and recognize a pre-established harmony of action are in danger of embracing objectivist fantasies. For Bourdieu, objectivism assumes the presence of atemporal pre-established harmonies within culture. A practice-based model recognizes that the observation of practices is the observation of an action formed over a long period of time—it is diachrony on display. When observers tend to the practices of an agent, they are witnessing the transformation of history into nature. Bourdieu is clear that we do not have access to the entire historical record of the past—some events, ideas, and power dynamics have been lost in the forward rush of time—but we do have access to the practices of people. By observing practice we are able to witness the history of production.

Bourdieu's practice approach to culture refuses to bracket time out of the observation of culture. Indeed, to exclude time would prevent the observer from observing strategy—a central component of practice.⁴¹ Bourdieu writes, “by ‘simultaneizing’ the successive moments of social processes, all the techniques that the ethnographer routinely utilizes . . . kill properly strategic dimensions of practices which is related to the existence, at every moment, of uncertainty, indeterminations, if only subjective ones.”⁴² Bourdieu is clear: practices are always strategic and time is necessary for strategy. Bracketing time out of cultural observation admittedly allows the observer to build a more comprehensive structure that is governed by inalienable rules. However, such a system cannot account for the strategic action and exercising of power that breaks the rules, not to mention how tactical action sabotages reproduction and initiates change.

In his famous discussion of gift giving, Bourdieu explains that time is not merely important for the unfolding of interactive practices, but also instrumental in providing meaning to the practices. For example, if a gift is reciprocated too quickly, then the eagerness of the reciprocator can be seen as a way to settle the “debt” and close off the relationship. If it is reciprocated too slowly, then disrespect is implied. If we were to bracket time out of the observation, the automatic reciprocation of a gift would give the impression that there is a social norm that demands reciprocal gift giving. Yet, when time is inserted into observation understanding the action of gift giving becomes more difficult. Bourdieu writes, “To substitute strategy for the rule is to reintroduce time, with its rhythm, its orientation, its irreversibility.”⁴³ Let me also add that to substitute strategy for the rule is to make observation much harder.⁴⁴ The notion of strategy is Bourdieu's way of adding indeterminacy to his sociological method.

Bourdieu argues that the static modes of ethnographic inquiry promote a static and pristine view of culture. He resists this depiction, favoring a portrayal of culture that is the product of restless operations, strategic improvisations, internal dynamics, and external forces. Bourdieu recognizes that there is a place for synchronic observation, but synchronic observation without a corresponding diachronic move will lead to objectivist fictions.

For Bourdieu, history is not something that happens to people, it is something that they make. History is the product of social agents and their strategic action. Simultaneously, history is the producing force that makes people. As Sherry Ortner notes, “A practice approach attempts to see this making, whether in the past or present, whether in the creation of novelty or in the reproduction of the same old thing. Rather than fetishizing history, a practice approach offers, or at least promises, a model that implicitly unifies both historical and anthropological studies.”⁴⁵

Homiletics, like an observational science, is always in danger of creating a detemporalized conception of action and structure, struggling to therefore unify the production of and reproduction of history. This is due in part to the pervading synchronic view of the “actor” and her relation to the “structure.” Descriptions of ethnography within the field of homiletics have largely treated time as an external reality to structure and actor and unnecessary to observe culture. Bourdieu on the other hand, substitutes the concepts of actor and structure for habitus and field, thereby inserting time into the equation. For Bourdieu, habitus and field are “two modes of existence of history.”⁴⁶

Bourdieu's vision of practice is history on display in the nonstop relational interplay of habitus and field. Within Bourdieu's schema, time is a necessary component for understanding the logic of the practice within the field. The role of history finds its rationale within the bodies of the observed. Bourdieu's vision of history, action, and bodies presents a foundation for intra-disciplinary conversation among those who study past practices of preaching and those who study present practices of preaching. A practice approach to homiletics provides opportunity for those who study past practices to make conclusions about the present and those who study the present to trace practices to their genesis in the past. The field of homiletics is strengthened by those historians who can help trace the genesis of our present preaching through a history of practice.

In her book, *Preaching as Testimony*, Anna Carter Florence begins with a historical discussion of three woman preachers: Anne Marbury Hutchinson, Jarena Lee, and Sarah Osborn.⁴⁷ Florence describes the preaching life of these three women because their preaching ministries provide historical roots for an overlooked practice that has faded over time—testimony. These historical preachers are not simply examples of previous testimony, but the roots of a preaching tradition that is embodied by those on the margins of our world. Florence retells these stories in order that we might “hear echoes of our own conversations, the ones we cannot seem to finish or resolve.”⁴⁸ And maybe, Florence writes, “that is the point. In these stories, unfinished and ongoing, lie the bright threads of an unmistakable tradition...of preaching women and preaching men, becoming preachers in America.”⁴⁹ The presence of history in our homiletical discussions exposes the provisional nature of our preaching conclusions and widens our imagination of what preaching can become. It inserts the journey of our thinking and practice into the conversations about our destinations and in doing so, provides a more complete picture of the practice that we observe.

In conclusion, I have examined the work of Pierre Bourdieu and his social theories of practice, noting the ways in which practice theory cautions and aids our works as observers, because I am confident that social theories of practice hold great promise for the future of homiletics. It is my sincere hope that this paper might begin a robust conversation within a field that is wrestling with what it means to be a critical observer of preaching.

Notes

1 Within the past forty years, two important and influential theories of practice have risen to academic prominence. In *After Virtue*, moral philosopher Alisdair MacIntyre argued that practice is the “coherent and complex form of socially cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized...” Alisdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (South Bend, IN: Notre Dame Press, 1981), 187. Practices are responsible for achieving both social goods while also creating a standard by which other practices might be judged. MacIntyre's vision of practice is concerned with describing the way in which cultural hierarchies of goods might be legitimate and appropriate without appealing to broken-down metaphysical authorities. MacIntyre's description of practice thus buttresses the eroded foundations of moral philosophy. The second influential theory of practice has been imported from the Ecole's of France and is designed to describe the relationship of the human action within complex social hierarchies.

While both have adopted the term “practice” they are describing two different phenomena. These two concepts of practice are not necessarily mutually exclusive, but neither are they totally compatible. In this paper I will speak exclusively about the latter notion of practice.

2 Sherry B. Ortner, “Theory in Anthropology Since the Sixties,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 26, No. 1 (Jan., 1984), 148.

3 For instance, a new “post-humanist” group of thinkers would argue that practice theory ought to make room for the ways in which the human and the material world mutually constitute each other. Andrew Pickering, “Practice and posthumanism: social theory and a history of agency,” in *The Practice Turn in Contemporary Theory*, eds. Theodore R. Schatzki et al. (London: Routledge, 2001), 164.

4 David Swartz notes, “Bourdieu has published more than 30 books and 340 article over the period of 1958 and 1995. Many of these works are collaborative, as Bourdieu is also founder and director of his own research center, the Centre de Sociologie Européenne...Indeed, it is no exaggeration to say that Bourdieu’s efforts have culminated in the development of a veritable new school of French sociology on a scale comparable to that produced a earlier this century by one of his principle sources of inspiration: Emile Durkheim.” Swartz further notes that by the late 80’s Bourdieu was among the most cited French social scientists in the U.S. David Swartz, *Culture & Power: The Sociology of Pierre Bourdieu* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 2.

5 For another fascinating account of the relationship between agency and structure in sociology and anthropology see: Anthony Giddens, *Central Problems in Social Theory: Action, Structure, and Contradiction in Social Analysis* (London: Macmillan, 1979), esp. Chapter 2: Agency and Structure.

6 David Swartz, *Culture and Power: The Sociology of Pierre Bourdieu* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 96.

7 Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 101.

8 Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 78.

9 Karl Maton, “Habitus,” *Pierre Bourdieu: Key Concepts* (Stocksfield: Acumen, 2008), 53.

10 Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc J. D Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 126.

11 Unfortunately, argues Bourdieu, the notion of capital has been hijacked by Marxism which has reduced the complex universe of exchange to simple economic exchange.

12 Bourdieu’s idea that all actors are cultural capitalists begins to break down when those who have little or no capital to invest are observed. Bourdieu’s keen eye differentiates the different types of capital and how these types construct different class strata, yet his keen observation loses its edge when observing the severely impoverished. See: Swartz, *Culture & Power*, 82.

13 While Bourdieu’s sociological theory has been highly influential, it represents only a small fraction of his writing. The bulk of Bourdieu’s writing has been the sociological description of various fields present in society. In many ways, Bourdieu’s idea of field is his most exciting concept and his most misunderstood. It is exciting because Bourdieu’s conception of field provides firm methodological ground to observe culture.

And yet, Bourdieu's concept of field is often his most misunderstood concept because it is confused as a synonym for market or system, which are both ideas Bourdieu is trying to avoid.

14 Bourdieu frequently uses the analogy of game to describe a field with some qualifiers: first, a field is not the product of a deliberate act of creation. Second, a field does not follow strict rules. Rather it follows regularities that are not codified. David Swartz puts it this way, "Fields denote arenas of production, circulation, and appropriation of goods, services knowledge or status, and the competitive positions held by actors in their struggle to accumulate and monopolize these different kinds of capital. Fields may be thought of as structured spaces that are organized around specific types of capital or combinations of capital." Swartz, *Culture and Power*, 117.

15 Ibid., 23

16 Ibid.

17 Wacquant in Bourdieu and Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*, 35.

18 See Ronald A. Allen, "The Turn to the Listener: A Selective Review of a Recent Trend in Preaching," *Encounter*, 64 no. 2 (Spring, 2003), 167-196; Beverly Zink-Sawyer, "The Word Purely Preached and Heard: The Listeners as Homiletical Endeavor," *Interpretation* 51 (1997): 342-57

19 Empirical studies of the listening congregation have been a fascinating addition to the discipline of homiletics. These studies have given us access to broad trends and understandings of preaching, but very few have spent time in deep ethnographic study trying to understand how the practice of preaching might intersect with other locally conditioned practices. See: Hans Van Der Gest, *Presence in the Pulpit: The Impact of Personality in Preaching*, trans. Douglass W. Stott (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1981); Eric Reed, "The Preaching Report Card: Today's Listeners Grade Pastors on What They Hear From the Pulpit," *Leadership* 20 (Summer 1990): 82-87; Lori Carrel, *The Great American Sermon Survey* (Wheaton, IL: Mainstay Church Resources, 2000); James Nieman and Thomas Rodgers, *Preaching to Every Pew: Cross Cultural Strategies* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001); John McClure et al, *Listening to Listeners*, (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2004); Ronald A. Allen, *Hearing the Sermon: Relationship, Content, Feeling Channels of Listening* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2004); Marianne Gaarden and Marlene R. Lorensen, "Listeners as Authors in Preaching: Empirical and Theoretical Perspectives," *Homiletic* 38.1 (2013): 28-45. For a recent overview of empirical studies of preaching, see: David Rietveld, "A Survey of the Phenomenological Research of Listening to Preaching," *Homiletic* vol. 38, No. 2 (2013): 30-47.

20 This critique is not a new one. Specifically, the work of the inductive homiletic of Fred Craddock and the narrative homiletics of Eugene Lowry, Edmund Steimle, and Charles Rice are especially prone to overlooking the pervasive influence of context and culture. For a more complete critique of these homiletics, see: John McClure, *Other-wise Preaching: A Postmodern Ethic for Homiletics* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2001), 48-66.

21 In some ways this critique of wide scale social research is not limited to preaching but to all research that attempts to grasp a common experience by conducting a comprehensive survey. These surveys are quite helpful as broad maps, but they are not, in the end, detailed descriptions of the network of practices. Bourdieu's social theory of practice has room for wide-scale empirical research and yet, within the guild of homiletics it is local ethnographic studies of congregations have been largely absent from the canon of homiletical empirical research.

22 Specifically, the work of Rebecca Chopp has been massively influential in the field of homiletics. Chopp's semiotic theology has served as a helpful resource for many homileticians including Anna Carter Florence and John McClure. See Rebecca Chopp, *The Power to Speak: Feminism, Language, God* (New York: Crossroad, 1989); Anna Carter Florence, *Preaching as Testimony* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2007), 92-106; McClure, *Other-wise Preaching*; and James Henry Harris, *Preaching Liberation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995).

23 Marshall David Sahlins, *Historical Metaphors and Mythical Realities: Structure in the Early History of the Sandwich Islands Kingdom*, ASAO Special Publications no. 1 (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1981), 67.

24 Pierre Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996), 262.

25 Christine Smith, "Preaching: Hospitality, De-Centering, Re-membering and Right Relations," in *The Purposes of Preaching*, ed. Jana Childers (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2004), 91-92.

26 See for instance, see: Charles Campbell, *The Word before the Powers: An Ethic of Preaching*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002); Christine Smith, *Preaching as Weeping, Confession and Resistance: Radical Responses to Radical Evil*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1992); Justo and Catherine Gonzales, *The Liberating Pulpit*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994); John McClure, *Other-wise Preaching*; and Anna Carter Florence, *Preaching as Testimony*.

27 Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984), 29-43.

28 Michel de Certeau, *La Prise De Parole, Pour Une Nouvelle Culture* (Paris: Desclée De Brouwer, 1968), 35-38.

29 Jeremy Ahearne, *Michel De Certeau: Interpretation and Its Other, Key Contemporary Thinkers* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995), 159.

30 Ibid.

31 Smith, *Preaching as Weeping, Confession and Resistance*, 1.

32 David Schnasa Jacobsen & Robert Allen Kelly, *Kairos Preaching: Speaking Gospel to the Situation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 38. Jacobsen and Kelly describe kairos preaching as something a preacher does occasionally, but I submit that kairos preaching is the regular practice of the preacher who is responding to the latest iteration of the social matrix.

33 Swartz, *Culture & Power*, 270.

34 This question is especially important in light of Bourdieu's chosen vocation. Given his scathing description of the French academy in *Homo Academicus*, how can Bourdieu justify his own existence as a French intellectual? What about him and his method are so different than the rest of the French academy? In a word: reflexivity.

35 Bourdieu, in “Sur L’Obectivation participant” Actes de La Recherche en Sciences Sociales, 1978. As quoted in Bourdieu and Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*, 68. Objectivation is Bourdieu’s way of talking about a sociological analysis that seeks to observe both the object and the subject’s relation to the object.

36 Ibid. See also, Pierre Bourdieu, “Flaubert’s Point of View,” *Critical Inquiry* 14, no. 3 (Spring 1988): 593–562.

37 Ibid.

38 Bourdieu, *Homo Academicus*, 15.

39 Ibid.

40 Ted Smith, *The New Measures: A Theological History of Democratic Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

41 Note the difference here between Bourdieu’s vision of strategy and Certeau’s vision of strategy described above. For one Bourdieu is speaking specifically about the consequence of action, not the intent of the actor. The actor might want to make it look as if time is irrelevant but that does not mean that it is. Bourdieu describes all action as strategic because all action is interested. Certeau largely agrees with this assessment but divides the intent of the actor into two discrete parts: strategy and tactic.

42 Pierre Bourdieu, “The Scholastic Point of View,” *Cultural Anthropology* 5, no. 4 (November 1, 1990): 385.

43 Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, 8. Bourdieu explains that even the most ritualized actions permit strategies because the actors can modify time. Bourdieu writes, “Even the most strictly ritualized exchanges, in which all the moments of the action, and their unfolding, are rigorously foreseen, have room for strategies: the agents remain in command of the interval between the obligatory moments and can therefore act on their opponents by playing with the tempo of exchange.” Ibid., 15.

44 Note that strategy for Bourdieu does not mean a utilitarian orientation to the world. Strategy for Bourdieu is not necessarily a conscious or rational choice. Strategies are the reaction of agents as they practically orient their life in a particular field. This orientation incorporates ambiguities and uncertainties that emerge from being an actor who exists in time. Swartz calls social actors “strategic improvisers who respond dispositionally to the opportunities and constraints offered by various situations.” Swartz, *Culture & Power*, 100.

45 Ortner, “Theory in Anthropology Since the Sixties,” 159.

46 Bourdieu and Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*, 138.

47 Florence, *Preaching as Testimony*, 4.

48 Ibid.

49 Ibid.