Thematizing Embeddedness
Reflexive Sociology as Interpretation

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This article examines the interpretive dimensions of human action. Although it takes the reflexive sociology of Pierre Bourdieu as its starting point, the article attempts to develop a more robust hermeneutical account of the reflexivity of social actors and those who study them than Bourdieu himself has considered. It is argued that interpretation is best understood not as the homologous expression of inculcated structures but rather as context-sensitive and reflexively context-transforming action—or what the author wishes to characterize, respectively, as first- and second-order thematizations of embeddedness. The article concludes by contrasting the author's position with the thick description of Clifford Geertz.

It would not be unfair to suggest that the reflexive sociology of Pierre Bourdieu stands or falls on the merits of its attempt to rethink two versions of the objectivism-subjectivism dualism in social theory.[1] First, at the level of a *theory of practice*, Bourdieu wants to overcome the familiar dualistic dilemmas posed by various "subjectivist" accounts of human action that pit the internal consciousness, strategizing rationality, and intentional capacities of agents against "objective," external, automatic, and invisible mechanisms such as markets, rules, systems, or a "state apparatus."[2] Such dualisms are typically cast in terms of free will versus determinism, intentionalism versus mechanism, or creativity versus conditioning, and often set the stage for abstract theoretical debates about the force of practical reason or the power of structural constraints—debates that, according to Bourdieu, have no correlate in the empirically embodied experiences of social actors. As a more materialist antidote to what he sees as the

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false theoretical dualism of objectivism-subjectivism, Bourdieu develops an account of "habitus," understood as a context-sensitive set of durable dispositions or ingrained orientations and moves that, once acquired, functions as a "structuring structure" for the production and reproduction of human actions.

Second, at the level of *social scientific method*, Bourdieu wants to overcome the objectivism-subjectivism dualism that haunts observer-participant methodological debates in social theory and has led, particularly in the field of cultural anthropology, to the substitution of an observational "god's eye view" for various forms of participatory navel gazing.[3] As an antidote to what he calls "pseudoreflexivity," Bourdieu claims that sociological inquiry is "reflexive" only to the extent that social scientists "objectivate" both the forms of social practice they study and the way in which their own sets of ingrained orientations (the "habitus" of class, of the academy, of the scientific community, etc.) structure the very structuring actions they, as social scientists, engage in.

Clearly, the general antidualist thrust of Bourdieu's formulation of reflexive sociology makes it preferable to undersocializing intentionalist accounts of individual agency (e.g., Hobbes or Hempel) and oversocializing systemic accounts of structures (e.g., Levi-Strauss or Luhmann)—as well as an attractive alternative to the linguistic pseudoreflexivity of some forms of "post"-modern cultural anthropology. But it is the central thesis of this article that if reflexive sociology is adequately to avoid the pitfalls of subjectivism-objectivism *and* capture the complexities and transformative potential of reflexivity *both* at the level of a theory of practice and at the level of sociological method, then it must be reconceived in more robust hermeneutical terms than Bourdieu has hitherto considered.[4] Put simply, the chief merit of Bourdieu's theory of practice is to show how the context-sensitive character of social action cannot be captured in either subjectivist or objectivist frameworks, but instead must be understood as something like context-specific *sens pratique* or a context-sensitive "feel for the game." Similarly, the chief merit of Bourdieu's methodological insights is to remind social scientists that their own "practical senses" must be reflexively incorporated into social analysis. The chief shortcoming of Bourdieu's theory of practice, however, is that in an eagerness to avoid "subjectivism" (which for Bourdieu means the privileging of an autonomously strategizing agent over and against

an external world of manipulable objects), Bourdieu tends toward a rather deterministic sense of the interpretive, context-transforming potential of context-sensitive action.[5] For when properly understood, human action should not be construed merely as a limiting technical accomplishment of the reproduction of a habitus but rather as an *enabling* "materialist interpretation," or what I shall distinguish here and elaborate in what follows as first-order (context-sensitive) and reflexive second-order (context-transforming) thematizations of *embeddedness*.[6] Such an actions-theoretic account of interpretation as the context-sensitive and context-transforming thematizations of embeddedness, as I shall try to show, best describes the kind of reflexivity Bourdieu's sociology in fact wants to articulate, both at the level of a theory of practice and at the level of the reflexive methods of social science.

In what follows, I shall outline the strengths and interpretive weaknesses of Bourdieu's theory of practice, and then summarize in hermeneutic terms Bourdieu's calls for reflexivity on the part of the social scientist (section I). Using Bourdieu's work as a point of departure, I shall then go on to elaborate an alternative account of reflexivity in terms of thematizing embeddedness (section II). Such an account, I shall argue, accomplishes what reflexive sociology does best: it captures the interpretive, context-sensitive aspects *and* context-transforming potential of human action without denigrating agents or hypostatizing structures. Indeed, I want to go so far as to suggest that thematizing embeddedness constitutes one of the core elements of human action and its sociological study.[7] Finally, I shall end with a brief consideration of what I take to be the practical use of thinking of reflexive sociology in the hermeneutical terms of thematizing embeddedness, and suggest why it is preferable to its influential interpretive competitor, the model of text and text reading or "thick description" found in the work of Clifford Geertz (section III). Hence, the analysis to be developed here may be mapped in the following way: my consideration of Bourdieu's work in section I serves as a jumping-off point for the alternative account of "reflexive sociology as interpretation" I want to elaborate in section II, while the brief turn to Geertz's work in section III affords me a point of contrast for the interpretive account of thematizing embeddedness developed in section II.

I. CONTEXT-SENSITIVE ACTION AND METHODOLOGICAL REFLEXIVITY

In a 1986 interview, Bourdieu described his theory of practice as a response to the determinism of Levi-Straussian structuralism and Althusserian Marxism, both of which, according to Bourdieu, had "degraded actors to a mere bearer of structure."[8] Bourdieu says that his

> intention was to bring real-life actors back in who had vanished at the hands of Levi-Strauss and other structuralists, especially Althusser, through being considered as epiphenomena of structures. I do mean "actors," and not "subjects." An action is not just the mere carrying-out of a rule. Neither in archaic nor in our society are social actors regulated automatons who, like clockwork, follow mechanical laws existing outside of their consciousness. Even in the most complicated action sequence, e.g., matrimonial exchange or ritual practices, they bring into play the embodied dispositions of a generative habitus. . . . This "game sense" . . . allows the generation of an infinite number of "moves" in correspondence to the infinite plurality of possible situations which cannot be covered by any one rule.[9]

The distinction between the "game sense" of social actors and the "rule following" of mechanized subjects is crucial to Bourdieu's theory of "real-life" actors and the structured and structuring character of their practices. On Bourdieu's account, actors are *context-sensitive bearers of structures*. In contrast to a conception of action as fixed, universal and rigidly structured "rule following," "game sense" is fluid, temporal, anticipatory, and embodied. It outfits actors not with a set of external "rules" but with the practical schemes of preperceptions, anticipations, and "feel" necessary to "play the game" of social life appropriately (which for Bourdieu is not necessarily the same as "winning" or maximizing outcomes). Bourdieu's account of "game sense," I want to suggest, is best understood as context-sensitive action.

Perhaps the context-sensitive character of Bourdieu's "game sense" could be amplified via athletics. For an athlete, acquiring "game sense" means acquiring the dispositions needed to anticipate and make explicit the dynamics of specific contexts of action (contexts that in sports jargon are often referred to as "game conditions"). In other words, it is not enough for a baseball player merely to mechanically obey the rules that limit the strike zone, he must acquire the context sensitivity necessary to "sense" each opponent's and umpire's strike zone, and alter his play accordingly.[10] Similarly, it is insufficient

for a boxer merely to follow the rules of the ring, he must also have the context sensitivity necessary to "feel out" his opponent, the referee, and the crowd, and modify his fighting accordingly (here one thinks of the richness of the verb "to counterpunch"). In neither case would it be accurate to say that context-sensitive action reduces actors to "subjects" or "degraded bearers of structure." On the contrary: in the absence of embodied context sensitivity or "game sense," it is difficult to imagine how in fact one could be a baseball player or a boxer at all. It is just such an insight into the enabling features of the context-sensitive dispositions of "real-life actors" that Bourdieu wants to elicit in his appeal to the embodied and temporal character of "the fact of the habitus as a *feel for the game*."[11]

It is clear that the strength of Bourdieu's reintroduction of social actors lies in its ability to conceive of the structured and structuring character of human action in embodied terms that avoid subjectivist-objectivist dualisms. Context-bound or structured action is better thought of in terms of context sensitivity or "game sense" than as rule following, since it appears to avoid the mechanistic reductions of Levi-Straussian structuralism and Althusser-inspired Marxism. Yet what, precisely, is the nondualistic and enabling link between "game sense" (context sensitivity) and game (context) here? When we acquire a genuine "feel for the game," do we simply let the game play us? Bourdieu seems to imply as much when he says that

> having the feel for the game is having the game under the skin; it is to master in a practical way the future of the game; it is to have a sense of the history of the game. While the bad player is always off tempo, always too early or too late, the good player is the one who anticipates, who is ahead of the game. Why can she get ahead of the flow of the game? Because she has the immanent tendencies of the game in her body, in an incorporated state: *she embodies the game*.[12]

But if it is the case that social actors merely "embody" the game—are themselves *played*—then Bourdieu's account of context-sensitive action is either hypersensitive or rather insensitive. Either way, there begins to emerge in Bourdieu's theory of practice a kind of strict homology in which the game really does play us.[13] That is to say that the precise nature of the "sense" of "game sense" in Bourdieu is unclear. Does the context sensitivity of my habituated actions merely equip me to play the game? Or does it also make it possible for me to reflexively transform that game from within? And, if the latter is possible, then what, precisely, is its relation to the former?

Such questions, I want to argue, are best answered within a hermeneutical framework that Bourdieu himself does not supply. Bourdieu's nondualistic insight into the context-sensitive sense of "game sense" is ultimately an insight into the fundamentally interpretive character of human action. Thus, I shall argue in the next section that both the context sensitivity Bourdieu wants to describe with "game sense"—and the context-transforming possibilities it enables—can most productively be distinguished and developed in the hermeneutical terms of first- and second-order thematizations of embeddedness. Indeed, once the interpretive dimensions of context-sensitive action are clarified, it can be shown that social actors do not merely "embody" the games they play, they also reflexively transform them. Put simply: the chief weakness of Bourdieu's theory of practice lies in its hermeneutically impoverished account of context-sensitive human action. For even when Bourdieu does appeal to a conception of "interpretation" in his work, it amounts to a kind of interpretive determinism.

Consider for example Bourdieu's ethnographic account of the ritualistic practice of weaving in Kabyle culture:

> The Kabyle woman setting up her loom is not performing an act of cosmogony; she is simply setting up her loom to weave cloth intended to serve a technical function. It so happens that, given the symbolic equipment available to her for thinking her own activity . . . she can only think what she is doing in the enchanted, that is to say, mystified, form which spiritualism, thirsty for eternal mysteries, finds so enchanting.
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> Rites take place because and only because they find their raison d'être in the conditions of existence and the dispositions of agents who cannot afford the luxury of logical speculation, mystical effusions, or metaphysical anxiety. . . . The Kabyle peasant does not react to "objective conditions" but to the practical interpretation which he produces of those conditions, and the principle of which is the socially constituted schemes of his habitus.[14]

Here we see how the potentially rich, interpretive "game sense" of habitus is reduced to "practical interpretations" of reproduction in Bourdieu's ethnography. The rites of Kabyle peasant practice are inculcated techniques that homologously mimic the structures in which they take place. A Kabyle peasant may not react to externally "objective conditions," as Bourdieu claims. But for Bourdieu, "practical interpretation" is nevertheless the internalization and circular replication of those conditions, since the constituting principle of "interpretation" here is merely the inculcation of the "objectively

internalized" schemes of a habitus. Less abstractly: the problem with Bourdieu's ethnography of Kabyle practice is that he attaches richly *interpretive* human action to structures in a *non*interpretive way.[15] Interpretive context sensitivity appears here as "practical mimesis."[16] In such a "mimetic" account of interpretation, the deficit of Bourdieu's theory of practice becomes apparent. On Bourdieu's account, "interpretive" human action merely reflects and replicates structures. What Bourdieu misses is the reflexive, enabling features *built-in* to context-sensitive interpretive action—enabling features which, we shall see directly, Bourdieu nevertheless includes in his account of the methods of "reflexive sociology."

In light of the relative lack of interpretive reflexivity Bourdieu accords social actors, it is perhaps surprising to hear him demand such a rigorously high degree of methodological reflexivity on the part of social scientists. Nevertheless, Bourdieu's calls for a distinctly "reflexive sociology" represent a welcome antidote to the self-centered textual evoking of "post"-modern ethnography, for the kind of reflexivity Bourdieu is after cannot be reduced to methodological "self-reference" or "self-consciousness." As far as I can discern, Bourdieu's version of "reflexivity" occurs at three levels: at the level of the social scientist or critic, at the level of the field of academic discourse (the habitus of science, sociology, history, etc.), and at the level of a critique of society. The first level of reflexivity captures the social coordinates of the researcher, or what Bourdieu calls the researcher's "biographical idiosyncrasy."[17] The second level of reflexivity describes the coordinates of those coordinates, or what Bourdieu calls the position the researcher occupies in "academic space and the biases implicated in the view she takes by virtue of being 'off-sides' or 'out of the game.'"[18] While the third level of reflexivity takes reflexivity out of the mode of mere description and makes it political and critical, "by helping the progress of science and thus the growth of knowledge about the social world," Bourdieu argues, "*reflexivity makes possible a more responsible politics*, both inside and outside of academia."[19]

The way in which such a threefold methodological reflexivity is achieved, according to Bourdieu, is via nondualistic "participant objectivation." Participant objectivation *transforms* the natural relation of the observer to his universe of study; it makes the mundane exotic and the exotic mundane in an attempt "to render explicit what in both cases is taken for granted."[20] Although Bourdieu's general suspicion of the interpretive mood of contemporary social theory makes him reluctant to elaborate this crucial "making it explicit"

function of reflexive sociology in hermeneutic terms, it is hard to see how or why it should be understood otherwise. For, in fact, reflexivity here is about the enabling context-sensitive ways in which social scientists make explicit and potentially transform the three levels of embeddedness outlined above. First, the researcher thematizes or makes explicit the way in which she is embedded in her biography. Second, she thematizes or makes explicit the way in which that biography (or thematization) is embedded in the field of academic-scientific practice. Finally, such thematizations provide the resources not merely for more first-order thematizations but also for second-order thematizations that have the potential to transform "what is taken for granted" in existing social fields. It is precisely for this reason that Bourdieu argues that the achievement of reflexivity lends sociology a distinctly critical edge: "reflexive sociology allows us to understand, to account for the world . . . to *necessitate the world*."[21]

Thus, the reflexivity accorded to social scientists by Bourdieu stands in stark contrast to the interpretive determinism that marks his theory of practice. Reflexivity makes context-sensitive human action something much more than a mere technical interpretation or "practical mimesis" of a given structured habitus. Indeed, on Bourdieu's own account, it makes them potentially context-transforming "*necessitations*." Yet, in Bourdieu it seems that only social scientists have purchase on the kind of reflexivity needed to bring about the "necessitations" of social change. One of the core tasks of a hermeneutically robust "reflexive sociology," however, is to extend interpretive reflexivity to social actors themselves.

II. THEMATIZING EMBEDDEDNESS: ON CONTEXT-SENSITIVE AND CONTEXT-TRANSFORMING INTERPRETATIONS

In the previous section, I advanced two arguments. First, I claimed that Bourdieu's theory of practice as "game sense" is in the end an insight into the context-sensitive, essentially interpretive dimensions of social action; I then went on to suggest that Bourdieu does not adequately exploit the interpretive reflexivity of context-sensitive action in his theory of practice. Second, I summarized Bourdieu's account of reflexive sociology and began to translate it in terms of "thematizing embeddedness." In this section, I want to elaborate and present

several examples of what, precisely, the term embeddedness and its first- and second-order thematizations describe, and how its hermeneutical richness should be characterized and distinguished from Bourdieu's theory of practice.

Embeddedness is both the implicit matrixes of empirical relations in which actors find themselves and the interpretive location from which actors make such implicit ensembles of relations explicit in their everyday practices. The thematization of various forms of embeddedness—linguistic, cultural, economic, political, historical, and so on—is how actors are involved in and appropriate the structured world in which they live. Put in more Bourdieuean terms, thematizing embeddedness is the way we, as context-sensitive bearers of structures, explicitly "make sense" of and "play" the social "games" in which we find ourselves.

Let us define this "making it explicit" activity as a *first-order thematization of embeddedness*. I say "first order" in an attempt to designate how thematizing embeddedness need not be seen as an extraordinary practice or merely the correct mapping of a conceptual scheme but constitutive of the context-sensitive feel needed to negotiate and appropriate a structured situation. An everyday example of the functioning of such context-sensitive "first-order" thematizations is entering, appropriating, and exiting the socially structured and structuring spaces we call "rooms." As social actors, a considerable portion of our day is spent entering and undertaking activities in and leaving various rooms—office and meeting rooms, waiting rooms at transportation hubs, lecture halls and libraries, shops and stores, dining rooms and bedrooms, and so on. Yet, we do not deploy an abstract concept of "room" in order to come and go appropriately. Nor do we first encounter the discreet contents of any given room and then realize that the space is in fact a "room." Instead, we are quite literally *involved* in rooms; it is precisely in that sense that we so often speak of the "feel" of a room. Such a "feel" is a first-order thematization of embeddedness—a materialist interpretation of our involved entrances, stays, encounters, and exits—since it makes explicit what kind of room we are in and how that room's context must be accessed, negotiated, and appropriated.

To be sure, "rooms" are not simply structured and structuring social spaces. They are also *culturally* specific ones. Here a related example of the functioning of first-order thematizations of embeddedness presents itself. Being a guest at a dinner party includes

such first-order thematizations of embeddedness as ringing the bell on the front door of the dinner party host's home rather than entering unannounced through a back window, sitting in a dining room chair rather than on top of the table, holding the handle rather than the blade of the knife while eating, making "appropriate" conversation, and so on. In each case, what is first required is making explicit the culturally embedded predicament of being a guest in a particular setting. We do this *not* by following a "rule"—there are no "rules" in a strict sense for entering front doors or making appropriate dinner conversation in American culture—but rather by letting our culturally ingrained feel for the context guide us. I say "letting" not to indicate passivity but to indicate how such an *activity* is so embodied and context specific that we are in fact often at our best as embedded dinner guests in our own culture when we just "act natural" and "don't think about it" or "try too hard."

Yet, it would be wrong to construe the embedded character of our first-order context-sensitive thematizations as merely a context-limiting condition. The thematization of embeddedness is not confined to homologizations of existing forms of embeddedness. Pace Bourdieu, we do not homologously "let" our interpretive feel for the game play us. Embeddedness names an enabling predicament of human practice insofar as it does not simply condemn actors to remain "in the room" or "play the game" but also makes it possible for them to transform such contexts from *within*. Let us define this transformative feature as a *second-order thematization of embeddedness*. I say "second order" here in an attempt to distinguish the inherently reflexive character of thematizing embeddedness. In many thematizations of embeddedness, social actors do not merely make explicit their context, they also thematize their own and others' thematizations. Such second-order, reflexive thematizations are potentially context transforming in at least one of three often overlapping ways: in moments of innovation, cross-appropriation, and collaboration. I single out such moments because they illustrate the nondualistic and materially enabling dimensions of the hermeneutical account of embeddedness I want to develop here. For innovation, cross-appropriation, and collaboration are not reducible to the mechanistic effects of "rule following." Nor are they merely voluntaristic actions on the part of "norm applicators." Rather, they are *reflexively* transformative social practices precisely because their thematizations are dependent upon yet can *alter* embeddedness. I want to take up each of these three in turn.

Innovation

Let me return to the example of the guest at the dinner party in order to begin to illustrate what I mean by a "second-order" reflexive thematization of embeddedness. The guest's culturally ingrained, context-sensitive feel for the game allows him to thematize or make explicit his role or position in a matrix of cultural relations known as a "dinner party"; hence, he rings the bell, enters through the front door, sits in a chair at the dinner table, and grasps the knife by the handle when he eats. Yet, he is never limited to such context-sensitive actions. He may—as many interesting dinner guests of course do, particularly in multicultural settings—thematize those thematizations, make a surprise entrance, sit on the floor rather than in a chair, or neglect certain silverware when he eats. When such reflexive second-order thematizations occur, the structured sociocultural context of "dinner party" is altered: existing and apparently rigid forms of embeddedness are innovatively reconfigured, new possibilities for action are opened up, new frames of reference are disclosed. Suddenly, others may now reflexively thematize the disclosive dinner guest's thematizations, thereby innovatively transforming not merely their role as "guests" but also the very context of "dinner party."

Not surprisingly, another way to elaborate the innovative function of reflexive second-order thematizations of embeddedness is via sporting games. Consider basketball. A person must know and obey the rules of the game of basketball in order to play the game. He must, for example, know that it is a violation of the rules to dribble the ball out of bounds; furthermore, he must, in a context-sensitive first-order thematization, make explicit that knowledge every time he steps onto the court and dribbles the ball. But such a context-sensitive first-order thematization in no way limits him to simply staying "in bounds" or being played by the rules; he does not merely "embody" the game. On the contrary, his "game sense" enables him to develop innovative moves that, in reflexively thematizing first-order thematizations, in fact transform the very "sense" of the game. He can, for example, maneuver around his opponents, dribble the ball in traffic, pass to his teammates, and score points—in disclosive variations, combinations, and juxtapositions that potentially alter both the game and his and other players' "senses" of it. A concrete result of the context-transforming force of such innovations would be the National Basketball Association's decision to install collapsible or "breakaway" rims

to accommodate and make safe emergent forms of the so-called slam dunk shot.

Cross-Appropriation

Of course, second-order reflexive thematizations of embeddedness are not limited to the context-transforming force of innovation *within* a particular context. Sometimes our second-order thematizations reflexively access features or practices we encounter in the everyday actions of individuals whose contexts and activities are initially foreclosed or unavailable to us. Let us call this kind of context-transforming thematization cross-appropriation. Cross-appropriations occur when we thematize the context-sensitive thematizations of others in their context, and then import that reflexively appropriated "sense" into our own practices. Social actors do this most often when first- and second-order thematizations of their embeddedness are not able to generate transformations on their own. Historical examples of such context-transforming cross-appropriations include the reflexive thematization and cross-appropriation of the non-Western practice of nonviolent protest in the American civil rights movement, or the way in which the American feminist movement did not merely thematize its own embeddedness but also thematized and cross-appropriated what were originally the privileged practices accorded men in a patriarchal society. In a recent discussion of "world-disclosive" interpretation and cross-appropriation, Spinosa, Flores, and Dreyfus make precisely this point:

> Women clearly have not simply retrieved the practices available for dealing with women and found new ways of introducing them to the center of our lives and interests.
>
> Rather, women have adopted practices from various groups according to each practice's use in specific situations. By proceeding in this ad hoc manner, the women's movement has developed a whole new body of practices for dealing with women. . . . For instance, in considerations of work-related hiring, promotion, and compensation, women have cross-appropriated practices applied to men.[22]

Collaboration

A third way in which reflexive second-order thematizations of embeddedness are potentially context transforming is in certain forms of collaborative action such as work and education. To carry out

any set of tasks that comprises a job, workers need not so much memorize their job descriptions as acquire a context-sensitive feel for the assigned tasks (hence, employees without "work experience" are almost always the least productive). Yet, as any worker (or employer) knows, such job context sensitivity must also include a "feel" for one's coworkers and those coworkers' own embodied context sensitivities vis-à-vis their work. Such a "feel" is richly reflexive, in that it enables workers to reciprocally thematize the approaches, styles, and orientations of *one another*. Indeed, what often gets us as workers out of "a rut" is precisely such reflexive feedback, in which the context sensitivities of my work "habits" and my coworker's (our first-order thematizations of our embeddedness in the field of "the factory," or "the office," or "the store") are collaboratively thematized in potentially context-transforming ways. When my coworker says, "I see you operating the machine this way. Why not try it like this?" he and I are engaged in collaborative second-order thematizations that can alter the way we work and the rigid (often dehumanizing and alienating) context in which that work takes place.

Education might similarly be characterized in terms of reciprocally and context-transforming second-order thematizations of embeddedness. A good instructor reflexively thematizes a seminar participant's thematization (say an oral presentation) not in a way that "corrects" the student or merely "evokes" that instructor's own biography but in a collaborative and open-ended attempt to open up new possibilities for further reflexive thematizations—including, of course, thematizations of her response to the oral presentation by other seminar participants, thematizations of her as an "educator," thematizations of the seminar itself, thematizations of the power matrix of the university, and so on.

In all three forms of second-order reflexive thematizations of embeddedness (innovation, cross-appropriation, and collaboration), we see how the interpretive yet structured context-sensitive character of human action is fundamentally *enabling*. Context sensitivity does not doom social actors to practical mimesis or the inculcation of structures. "Game sense," to return to Bourdieu's lexicon for a moment, does not simply mean that social actors antidualistically "embody" the game. For such *social* embodiment must be understood in more hermeneutically reflexive terms: a social actor's "game sense" makes the game not merely "playable" for him but also transformable by him. In short, the context sensitivity of first-order thematizations of

embeddedness makes second-order reflexive thematizations such as innovation, cross-appropriation, and collaboration *possible*.

III. CONCLUSION

I want to conclude by summarizing the hermeneutical account of thematizing embeddedness outlined in the previous sections and by contrasting it with another version of interpretive sociology, that of the model of text and text reading known as "thick description," in which the study of cultural others is conceived of as something akin to trying to read a manuscript.[23] This summary by way of contrast should not be viewed as a sustained critique of the work of Clifford Geertz and his appropriation of Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutics of text as a model for human action. Such a critique is both beyond the scope of this article and not integral to the account of thematizing embeddedness developed here. In fact, my position shares with Geertz an overarching commitment to the fundamentally interpretive character of human actions and the study of those actions. But by contrasting thematizing embeddedness with the interpretive sociology of "thick description," the *practical* merits of the former may be brought into sharper focus. Most generally, the difference between thematizing embeddedness and "thick description" turns on *how* "interpretation" is understood, both at the level of a theory of practice and at the level of social scientific method. Specifically, I think there are three ways in which the account of thematizing embeddedness elaborated in the previous sections may be positively distinguished from "thick descriptions" of cultural and social "texts."

First, while any account of human action as a text or "text"-like is inherently "text sensitive," the limited focus of "thick description" makes it rather *context insensitive*. As the account of thematizing embeddedness shows, reading a "cultural manuscript" must include "reading" its structured and structuring contexts. The models of text and text reading often obscure the fact that social actors are context-sensitive bearers of structures rather than autonomous or "free-standing" manuscripts.[24] What must be interpreted or "read" is not simply the "text" of social practices but the *embeddedness* of those practices; indeed, on my account the two are *inseparable*.

Second, the model of text as action suffers from a problem we saw in Bourdieu: the conception of text is not sufficiently reflexive at the level of a theory of practice. That is to say that it does not adequately

capture the potentially context-transforming dimensions of context-sensitive, "textured" action such as innovation, cross-appropriation, and collaboration. Put another way, the interpretively reflexive account of thematizing embeddedness elaborated here more richly describes how human actors do not merely "read" (or "mimic," as in Bourdieu) but also appropriate and alter the various structures in which they are embedded.

Finally, thematizing embeddedness can be distinguished from the model of text and its hermeneutic of "thick description" at the level of the reflexive methods of social scientific inquiry. On my account, cultural others are not "texts" but themselves first- and second-order thematizers of embeddedness. And chief among their thematizations is often the thematization of the embeddedness of the social scientist who "reads" them and their practices. Once reflexive sociology is reconceived in terms of thematizing embeddedness, methodological reflexivity need not signal the onset of interpretive "relativism" or an endless "play" of deep texts. On the contrary. Reflexive thematizations of embeddedness such as innovation, cross-appropriation, and collaboration often make possible *objective* reconfigurations of social practices—both the practices of the social scientist and those of the "subjects" she investigates.

The account of first- and second-order thematizations of embeddedness elaborated in this article has thus *deliberately* avoided conceiving of social practices as "texts" to be read "over the shoulders" of the agents embedded in those practices.[25] In the place of a text model of social practice—and in contradistinction to a conception of social analysis as a kind of literary criticism—thematizing embeddedness substitutes a practical and material approach: it seeks to show how social actors and those who study them nondualistically make explicit and reflexively transform the structured contexts in which they live—not as readable manuscripts, but as practicing agents who actively shape the world in which they are ineluctably embedded.

In short, the hermeneutic account of thematizing embeddedness elaborated here has sought to retain the core elements that are central to any reflexive sociology worthy of the name. It captures in nondualistic terms the interpretively context-sensitive character of social action, it captures the potentially context-transforming reflexivity enabled by such actions, and it describes the reflexive "methods" of the study of such actions. In thematizing embeddedness, reflexive sociology clarifies how social actors do not merely interpret the world in which they live but also transform it; it clarifies as well the

possibility that social scientists have no more—and no less—of an "interpretive" task.

NOTES

1. For three insightful criticisms of Bourdieu's attempt to transcend subjectivism-objectivism, see Jeffrey C. Alexander, "The Reality of Reduction: The Failed Synthesis of Pierre Bourdieu," in his *Fin de Siecle Social Theory: Relativism, Reduction, and the Problem of Reason* (London: Verso, 1995); Richard Jenkins, "Pierre Bourdieu and the Reproduction of Determinism," *Sociology* 16 (1982): 270-281; and Axel Honneth, "The Fragmented World of Symbolic Forms: Reflections on Pierre Bourdieu's Sociology of Culture," *Theory, Culture, and Society* 3 (1986): 55-66. Most generally, all three criticisms object, on various grounds, to the deterministic and circular character of Bourdieu's account of habitus.

2. A partial list of "subjectivists" includes thinkers such as Hobbes, Hempel, Elster, and Rawls, while a list of "objectivists" includes Levi-Strauss, Althusser, Foucault, and Luhmann, among others. In different ways, theorists such as Marx, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Garfinkel, Habermas, and Bourdieu attempt to incorporate the insights of subjectivism and objectivism nondualistically. The point of such an attempt, to paraphrase Marx, is to discern how actors "make history" not simply as they choose but "under circumstances directly encountered."

3. Here Bourdieu's targets are American "post"-modern ethnographic theorists such as James Clifford, George E. Marcus, and Stephen Tyler. See especially the volume edited by Clifford and Marcus titled *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986); see also Tyler's contribution to that volume. And for a historical overview of the emergence of kinds of ethnographic "styles" Bourdieu wants to reject, see George E. Marcus and Michael M. J. Fisher, *Anthropology as Cultural Critique: An Experimental Moment in the Human Sciences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986).

4. For a related hermeneutic discussion of Bourdieu's work, see Hubert Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, "Can There Be a Science of Existential Structure and Social Meaning?" in *Bourdieu: Critical Perspectives*, ed. Craig Calhoun, Edward LiPuma, and Moishe Postone (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 35-44. Dreyfus and Rabinow are right to suggest that "to understand the significance of human action requires an interpretive approach" (pp. 35-36). But they miss the point I want to make here, namely, that the cash value of an "interpretive approach" is not that it merely makes accessible the "meaning" of human action but rather that it best captures the reflexive, context-transforming potential of such action.

5. The interpretively deterministic cast of Bourdieu's theory of practice is in fact not in keeping with his methodological account of "reflexive sociology," as I shall demonstrate in section I.

6. The term "embeddedness" is deployed in economic sociology to examine how economic action in premarket societies is structured by social relationships of kinship, but grows increasingly autonomous in modern industrial society. Inasmuch as it seeks to demonstrate the social character of economic life, the conception of embeddedness can be understood most generally as a response to undersocialized or atomized-actor accounts of social agents. Yet, embeddedness becomes a "problem" in economic

sociology when accounts of the social character of economic action overdetermine structure, replacing undersocialized agents with overly socialized ones. The "problem" of embeddedness is typically solved by various appeals to subjectivism (in the guise of the disembedding effects of individual practical reason) or objectivism (in the guise of the historically differentiating forces of modernization and rationalization). See, for example, Mark Granovetter, "Economic Action and Social Structure: The Problem of Embeddedness," *American Journal of Sociology* 91 (1985): 481-510. What is striking about such discussions, however, is the absence of talk about the enabling *interpretive* dimensions of embeddedness. It is precisely such a hermeneutical rehabilitation of the conception of embeddedness that I want to develop in this article.

7. Hence, the position I want to advance here resonates strongly with the "structuration theory" of Anthony Giddens (*New Rules of Sociological Method*, 2nd ed. [Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993]). In elaborating what he calls the "double hermeneutic" of social science, Giddens rightly argues that "structure must not be conceptualized as simply placing constraints upon human agency, but as enabling. This is what I call the duality of structure. Structure can always in principle be examined in terms of structuration. To enquire into the structuration of social practices is to seek to explain how it comes about that structure is constituted through action, and reciprocally how action is constituted structurally" (p. 169). For an attempt to show the enabling *epistemic* features of interpretation, see James F. Bohman, "Holism without Skepticism: Contextualism and the Limits of Interpretation," in *The Interpretive Turn: Philosophy, Science, Culture*, ed. David R. Hiley, James F. Bohman, and Richard Schusterman (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991).

8. "The Struggle for Symbolic Order: An Interview with Pierre Bourdieu," *Theory, Culture and Society* 3 (1986): 35-51.

9. "The Struggle for Symbolic Order," 41.

10. In *The Construction of Social Reality* (New York: Free Press, 1995), John Searle makes a directly related point in his discussion of what he calls the "Background" and "Background abilities": "Suppose a baseball player learns how to play baseball. At the beginning he actually learns a set of rules, principles, and strategies. But after he gets skilled, his behavior becomes much more fluent, much more melodic, much more responsive to the demands of the situation. In such a case, it seems to me, he is not applying rules more skillfully; rather, he has acquired a set of dispositions or skills to respond appropriately, where the appropriateness is actually determined by the structure of the rules, strategies, and principles of baseball. The basic idea . . . is that *one can develop, one can evolve, a set of abilities that are sensitive to specific structures of intentionality without actually being constituted by that intentionality*" (pp. 141-42, emphasis added).

11. Pierre Bourdieu, *Practical Reason: On the Theory of Action* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), 80 (emphasis added).

12. *Practical Reason*, 80-81.

13. Although such a homology is something Bourdieu appears to want to avoid in his account of the entwinement of structures, habitus, and social practice, as his characterization of "intentionless invention of regulated improvisation" suggests. See Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), esp. 78-87.

14. *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, 115-16.

15. I borrow this insightful formulation from Alexander's critique of Bourdieu in *Fin de Siecle Social Theory*, esp. 135.

16. *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, 116.

17. Pierre Bourdieu and Loic J. D. Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 71.

18. *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*, 71-72.

19. *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*, 194.

20. *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*, 68.

21. *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*, 199.

22. See Charles Spinosa, Fernando Flores, and Hubert L. Dreyfus, *Disclosing New Worlds: Entrepreneurship, Democratic Action, and the Cultivation of Solidarity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997), 4, 27-28. Spinosa, Flores, and Dreyfus also cite the role of cross-appropriation in the freeing up of rigid gender classifications: "cross-appropriation can also produce massive changes in style, as when feminists cross-appropriated masculine practices and changed the styles according to which men and women understood gender identity" (p. 27). See also their crucial distinction between "customary disclosing" and "historical disclosing" (p. 22), which in many ways resonates with the distinction I make between "context-sensitive" or first-order thematizations of embeddedness and "context-transforming or second-order thematizations. The difference between my position and that outlined by Spinosa, Flores, and Dreyfus, however, is that I want to emphasize the *reflexive* character of "historical disclosing." For another discussion of the connection between "world disclosure" and social change, see James Bohman, "World Disclosure and Radical Criticism," *Thesis Eleven* 37 (1994): 82-97. Contra Heidegger and Rorty, Bohman argues that "world disclosure" is not the select province of poets and artists but the task of "radical" social criticism.

23. See Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 10.

24. For a useful discussion of the differences between Geertz's model of action as text and Bourdieu's conception of action as embodied practice, see Orville Lee, "Observations on Anthropological Thinking about the Culture Concept: Clifford Geertz and Pierre Bourdieu," *Berkeley Journal of Sociology* 33 (1988): 115-30.

25. The allusion here is to the penultimate paragraph of Geertz's "Notes on the Balinese Cockfight" in *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 452.

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