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A habitus of war and displacement?

Bourdieu's 'third way' and rural youth in Northern Uganda after two decades of war

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> I want to learn about Acholi culture to make my future look like the one of others and to make me fit in the society, because I missed them when I was young and even when I was growing up. I would ask other Acholi to teach me the way of how to live with others.[1]

My work in Uganda has allowed me to meet Florence, a 15-year-old, orphaned, formerly abducted female head-of household. Her reflections on what she is 'missing' in the midst of the over two decade long war in Northern Uganda have prompted me to radically reconsider youth's experiences in, and perceptions of, conflict. It has been quite difficult to examine the ways that my ongoing relationship with Florence has shifted my conceptions about youth in conflict, and I have been struggling for quite some time without a comprehensive theoretical framework to ground my

1 Interview with Florence (2008), Padibe IDP Camp, Northern Uganda.

thoughts, experiences and observations from the past three years. When long-term war, or crisis, is increasingly acknowledged as context (Vigh, 2008), Bourdieu's multi-level insights in the classic *Outline of a Theory of a Practice* (2008) into the nature of inquiries of the social world, provide very fruitful terms of analysis and methodological frameworks that can be especially useful in expanding difficult but vital discussions about socialization, identity formation, and war. His ideas around the convergence of structure and process within the socialized individual shed much light on how war as a social condition is practically manifested and navigated (Lubkemann, 2008).

Most discussions around youth in war tend to centre on the dichotomous contemporary realities of youth as both primary perpetrators and victims of conflict. As such, some have contemplated the structures that have produced war and youth's tenuous role within (Achvarina & Reich, 2006; Branch, forthcoming; Richards, 1996; Rosen, 2005; Utas, 2005; Wood, 2008). Other studies have focused on the effects of these physical realities on youth primarily within the psychosocial discourses of resilience and trauma (Boothby, Strang & Wessells, 2006; Eyber & Ager, 2004; Engle, Castle & Menon, 1996). My repeated experiences with Florence, however, hinted at something beyond these analyses. On several separate occasions, including the epigraphic conversation, Florence spoke about her perceived disconnection with Acholi society. Because she was an orphan in the midst of war and displacement, she somehow feels that she is missing some vital information to be a functioning and accepted member of her society. Recently, some other scholars have asked similar questions regarding socialization processes in war. Referring to her extensive experience in East Africa, Tefferi (2008) states that "conflict and displacement have led to the disruption of institutions and practices that would conventionally serve as a framework for the transition to adulthood" (p. 26). Jason Hart (2008) probes

the same issue, saying that "it [responsibilities placed on youth in conflict] should also lead us to wonder about the longer-term, societal consequences of conflict-induced situations in which children's transitions to full adult responsibility is truncated and occurs with little or no adult guidance" (p. 11).

Pierre Bourdieu's thoughts on 'how knowledge can be known' are interesting in light of Tefferi's and Hart's questions, Florence's revelations cited above, and my resulting dissatisfaction with both the objective (structural, statistical) and subjective (psychological, experiential) epistemological approaches to the problems of youth in conflict areas. Bourdieu states in *An Outline of a Theory of Practice* (2008) that "the social world may be the object of three modes of theoretical knowledge" (p. 3). The first is the objectivist mode examining structures, with an overall emphasis on the determining nature of macro social phenomena. The second is the phenomenological mode examining experience, with its overall emphasis on the micro and subjective construction of reality. The third acknowledges the limits of both and seeks to reconcile them in a dialectic of sorts that transcends the macro-micro dualism (Reay, 2004, p. 432). In this paper, I will apply Bourdieu's 'third way' to preliminary questions regarding the socialization of youth in long-term conflict zones. After a brief sketch of Florence's life from age 1 to 17, I will invoke Bourdieu's key concepts of *habitus*, *doxa* and *strategies* and will proceed by applying them in an analysis of one aspect of her life. Due to the constraints of space and time, it will be an incomplete offering, but hopefully one that sufficiently proves the continuing use value of Bourdieu's 'third way' of approaching problems of the social world with the aim of elucidating the abstruse realities of youth in conflict, specifically Florence's in the context of the war in Northern Uganda.

Born into war

The details of Florence's earlier years are quite hazy (as they are for many of us), and they are made even more so by the disorganizing and destructive nature of war and the loss of her parents. The current war between the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) and the Ugandan People's Defence Force (UPDF) began when the current President, Yoweri Museveni, came to power in 1986, about five years before Florence was born. Florence's father was killed when she was just one year old, and her mother soon returned to her own family's homestead nearby.[2] Florence does not remember much from this time except that she frequently slept in the bush with her brothers, away from the homestead, and that she heard a lot of gunfire. In 1997 (when she was six), her mother, brothers and she joined most of the rural population that fled to the outskirts of the district capital of Kitgum in response to massacres in the area that killed some 450 people (interview with Dolly Arach, July14, 2008). Her mother stayed with a man there who got sick and died of HIV/AIDS. After one year, the government opened 'protected villages', which were actually internal displacement camps with insufficient hygienic infrastructure and protection.[3] In 1998, Florence's mother opted to leave the outskirts of Kitgum town to return once again to her family's traditional lands instead of the internal displacement camps. Her mother died of HIV/AIDS in late 1999 when Florence was nine years old. Florence and her brothers spent the next years

2 The Acholi are a patrilocal, patrilineal society. As such, a woman moves to her husband's family's land upon marriage. When Florence's father died, her mother returned to her own family's land.

3 The camps, although touted as an instrument of protection for the civilian population, were actually part of the government's military strategy. "It is no secret that high-ranking army officers want the camps to remain as a valid military strategy, as they regard all Acholi as potential rebel supporters who must be controlled and monitored" (Branch 19, ARLPI 2002a quoted in Finnstrom, 2008, p.142). This strategy resulted in grossly high death rates due to lack of infrastructure in the camps, with figures climbing to approximately 1000 excess death per week in 2005 (The Republic of Uganda -Ministry of Health, 2005).

hiding in the bush and gardening in order to survive, while most people in the surrounding villages moved (most forcibly by the UPDF) to the camps. With an escalation of the war after 2002 (resulting from Operation Iron Fist I and II[4]), she and her brothers were finally forced into Padibe Internally Displaced Persons' (IDP) camp. Florence was then abducted by the Lord's Resistance Army rebel group in 2005 while collecting food outside the camp perimeter, and escaped one year later, finally returning to Padibe IDP Camp to live with her brothers.

I first met Florence in January 2007, six months after a ceasefire which has since run out, when she was 15 years old. It was about a year after she escaped from the rebels and she was living again with her three brothers in Padibe IDP Camp.[5] The second time I met Florence (December 2007), she had fought with her brothers and was kicked out of the hut. The fight occurred when one of her brothers brought in a wife who caused conflict with Florence. On her own in a different area of the camp, Florence became pregnant with the child of a man who, by the time I visited that December, was in jail for defilement of another underage girl. My third trip (July 2008) found her living with Okot, the father of her child (who was released from prison), in yet a different area of the camp. Gum, her son, had been born the month before. Okot's family had much land near the camp, and he and Florence were in the process of building a home and preparing the gardens for a full move out of the camp.

Florence's formative years were characterized by loss of life, multiple displacements and instability. Her schooling was interrupted by the war from a very early age, from repeated bouts of

4 "It is beyond doubt that the rebels suffered heavily under the Iron Fist campaigns. But in the wake of these campaigns, during which fighting in northern Uganda reached levels not experienced since the beginning of the war, the noncombatant population suffered more (Finnstrom, 2008, p.113).

5 Population of about 35000.

typhoid,[6] and from displacements between her father's and mother's family homesteads, the district capital, the internal displacement camp and various Lord's Resistance Army rebel camps in the bush. Kinship systems which had integrated orphans in the past had been severely affected by the war and its disastrous economic and social consequences. Florence became de facto head of her household at nine years old amidst the turmoil of war.[7]

How knowledge can be known

I have briefly described Florence's history here in order to situate the theoretical discussion. The very idea of trying to understand somebody who sees and has experienced the world so radically differently from oneself is itself a perplexing endeavour that also evokes power issues involved with speaking for others and representation (Alcoff, 1991-92; Ruby, 1991; hooks, 1992). Yet, I firmly believe that solutions can only be offered with continued dialogue and critical inquiry. I thus find it necessary to state the extreme caution, yet commitment, with which I advance in these kinds of conversations.[8]

In addition to a number of linguistic anthropologists who have touched on issues of subjective perceptual categories and constructions of reality (von Humboldt, for example in Trabant, 2000; Sapir, 1929; and Whorf, 1956), Alfred Shutz' phenomeno-

6 Typhoid was, and is still, quite common as a result of insufficient clean water access in the camps.

7 While Florence was a middle child (her younger brother was born to her mother by another man), she was the only girl. Her gender largely defined her duties in her social unit, and in accordance with customary Acholi social organization, was responsible for the cooking, cleaning, and practical well-being of her brothers.

8 As an engaged and applied academic, I believe that any activity departing from thick description, and involving the formulation and application of theory, must eventually be tested in terms of offering real world solutions to real world problems. As this is impossible here, I will proceed with the simple goal of using Bourdieu's 'third way' to help advance questions regarding youth in conflict.

logical ideas have gone a long way in pointing to the vast socially constructed conceptual differences, in addition to linguistic ones, that need to be surmounted in establishing true interpersonal communication and understandings of social realities (see especially *The Phenomenology of the Social World*, 1967). But other anthropologists, including Lévi-Strauss (1962), critique the purely phenomenological approach and state that somebody's conscious representations of experience may not actually aid in a deeper understanding of social reality. Bourdieu himself agrees and states that in addition to understanding subjective behaviour, it is important to consider overarching realities of a given society (one can say the structure) that offer rules which serve to create dissitions that then regulate subjective behaviour.[9] He also says that one cannot simply examine these structures or rules either, as they are static models that do not account for the temporal nature of the human condition (Bourdieu, 2008, p. 8). The importance, he says, is the dialectic activity between these two, offering the idea of *habitus* as a point of convergence of process-oriented phenomenological subjectivity and structure-oriented empirical objectivity.[10] I am most interested, then, in the idea of what is *habitus* through war and displacement, and what dispositions it creates and engenders for a girl like Florence who was born into and grew up in conflict.

9 I personally believe that Bourdieu's 'third way' is mostly based on phenomenological insight. I do not agree with his statements that phenomenology's goals are simply to describe subjective experience. As evidenced in recent anthropological writing, "what phenomenology stands against is the fetishization of the products of intellectual reflection. Thus, objectivism and subjectivism are equally untenable" (Jackson, 1996, p.1-2).

10 "Habitus is an old philosophical concept, used intermittently by Aristotle (under the term hexis), Thomas Aquinas, Hegel, Weber, Durkheim, Mauss, and Husserl, among others. Bourdieu retrieved it in a 1967 reinterpretation of art historian Erwin Panofsky's analysis of the connection between Scholastic thought and gothic architecture in the medieval era and refined it afterwards, both empirically and theoretically, in each of his major works" (Wacquant, 2006, p. 6).

Bourdieu states that *habitus* creates a system of dynamic dispositions that paradoxically stem from and in turn form perceptual categories. He calls these perceptual categories *generative themes*. The *generative themes* are thus the organizing principles of society. The communication of these organizing principles (in effect, socialization), primarily occurs within the home and then at school (Bourdieu, 2008, p. 87-89), structuring the perception of all subsequent experiences. In Florence's case, however, the backdrop of war, the absence of a stable home or schooling environment and years of displacement in IDP and rebel camps provide many questions as to the perceptual categories and organizing principles through which she understands the world. In addition, her acknowledgement of 'missing' something that would show her how to 'live with others' points to a perceived 'disrupted' or 'atypical' socialization.[11]

Trying to understand the construction of Florence's *habitus* and the dispositions it engenders may be aided by Bourdieu's notion of *doxa*. *Doxa* is the knowledge that is unspoken, unquestioned and natural in a society. It is that which makes the natural and social world appear as self-evident (Bourdieu, 2008, p. 164). But in the context of long-term war, how is *doxa* affected by violent conflict and displacement? Chris Dolan (2009) has recently made a strong case that the war in Northern Uganda has produced a system of social torture:

The so called 'protected villages' for the internally displaced are primary sites of this process, which I shall call *social torture*, as evidenced in widespread violation, dread, disorientation, dependency, debilitation and humiliation, all of which are tactics

11 Her consciousness of missing something intangible is not uncommon among youth in conflict. "Their [youth in conflict's] discussions give an impression of a web of relationships hacked through by the violence of war. These breaks in connection include links with the natural world, cultural life, community relationships and friendships—the structures and fabric of a child's life" (Children/Youth As Peacebuilders, 2004, p. 10).

and symptoms typical of torture, but perpetrated on a mass rather than the individual scale (p. 1).

What implications does this have for youth whose naturalized world consists of this torture? What happens when social torture and violence become incorporated into the self-evident part of society, the *doxa*? Sverker Finnström (2008) speaks of how Acholi adults refer to the everyday aspects of war as 'bad surroundings.' What then of youth who have only known 'bad surroundings'?

Bourdieu's idea of *strategy* is most useful here. He speaks of *strategies* as unconscious or conscious actions that seek the "satisfaction of material and symbolic interests and [that are] organized by reference to a determinate set of economic and social conditions" (Bourdieu, 2008, p. 36). Thus, after two decades of war and displacement, if a) cultural conceptual categories or *generative themes* have been disrupted, damaged and altered; b) for survival, the *habitus* of those affected by this prolonged conflict has incorporated the realities of prolonged and protracted war into the socialization of an individual; and c) *doxa* may include high levels of acceptable violence, then what are the strategies that youth use to navigate their complex and dangerous worlds? Perhaps it is by an examination of strategies themselves that the effects of conflict on *doxa*, *generative themes* and, finally, *habitus* can become clearer.

Embodied strategies

Although Florence's life was filled with uncertainty, she employed certain strategies for basic survival. Within her *habitus*, these survival strategies relied predominantly on instinct shaped by *doxa*, and the *generative themes* learned when her mother was still alive, and later from the realities of war in camp and/or rebel life. To be sure, any analysis at this point will be incomplete, but it is fruitful to examine Florence's pregnancy in light of these terms.

Aside from a year and a half with the LRA rebel group, Florence has always lived with her brothers. The war had drastically reduced the size of her kinship network and her *disposition* to care for her brothers still represented a certain social order in her life-world. When her brothers threw her out of the hut in the middle of 2007, Florence found herself without the little social organization that had hitherto shaped her world. She was also without male protection, and was essentially cut off from the socio-economic benefits of kin. Although the socio-economic benefits were not great due to displacement, people had begun to return to their traditional villages due to a ceasefire in hostilities. Given that the Acholi are a patrilineal society where most marriages are patrilocal (Girling, 1960, p. 21), Florence found herself alone in the camp and in a liminal state. She had recently dropped out of school due to repeated bouts of typhoid from unclean water in the camp, and she had only completed Primary 5 and was still not literate. Without an education, and without land to return to, what would she do to survive?

Soon after the split from her brothers, Florence became pregnant. Considering the idea of strategy, one could consider the idea that the pregnancy was elicited because she was shut out of her own family, and the order, rights and benefits that it allowed. Indeed, the pregnancy eventually brought her into the father of her child's kinship network, and she was given a place to live, land to farm and a home to share. Can we not say that Florence's pregnancy might have been her *strategy* within her *habitus*, and in accordance with the *doxa* and *generative themes* of her social world?

Despite the fact that many girls do not end up as fortunate as Florence (healthy and living with the father of her child), girls in her situation do not have diverse and viable options within the economic and social structures of their society after 23 years of war. Like Florence, many young girls' greatest resources are their

own bodies. Although Florence's situation may sound unique, it is far from that in the realities of this long and brutal war.

Of course, to continue with this analysis, in essence applying Bourdieu's 'third way' to an issue such as Florence's pregnancy, further inquiry must be done into Florence's *habitus*: the *generative themes* and *doxa* in Acholiland (Northern Uganda), and how they have been affected by long term conflict. One must situate her *strategies* within the larger societal and historical context by questioning traditional gender roles in Acholi culture, the forms and methods of their communication to Florence (oral tradition, home organization…), and their transformations from violence and displacement (for example changes in intergenerational knowledge exchange and structure of the 'home' from village life, to NGO-infused IDP camp life, to rebel camp life).

Conclusion

All in all, it appears that Bourdieu's 'third way' provides a useful framework for questions regarding youth in long-term conflict zones. Generally, one finds very little 'third way' dialectical analysis of how youth's life choices are made within a world composed of structures and systems radically affected by the temporal effects of violence. Considering that in Northern Uganda, for example, 90% of youth have grown up within Internally Displaced Persons' (IDP) camps, and about 20% of youth experienced abduction and rebel life at some point, insight into the ways in which violence and displacement has shaped social structures and organization, and the ways that youth negotiate between the realities of war on the one hand, and cultural values (or generative themes) on the other, would be useful indeed.

I think Bourdieu's strength can be summarized, in his own terms, as saying that a shift in epistemological inquiry must occur from the opus operatum to the modus operandi (Bourdieu,

2008, p. 72). There is great value is shifting analysis from the work wrought (the products, the experiences of war) to the mode of production itself (or the processes, the practices of survival in war). He is quite right in pointing out that modes of production, or practices, are actually a combination of subjective processes and objective rules or structures that can be examined by looking at the strategies that one uses to negotiate 'reality', broadly conceived. The advantage of incorporating the idea of *habitus* in understanding long-term war is its specific focus on the intersections of macro-level social structures and micro-level agency within the practical actions of an individual and/or society.

Its application to questions regarding youth in conflict could not be more necessary. Since 1980, 28 countries in Sub-Saharan Africa have been to war. Today, 40% of the world's 27 million Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) are in African countries, with most of the displacement due to ongoing or recurring fighting (Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, 2009). While there is growing agreement that "…the role of youth is critical in creating long-term stability … and offering protection from future conflicts" (Report of the Secretary General, 2003, p. 371), there is little insight on how to bring youth within local and global networks of social reconstruction. Bourdieu's 'third way' gives me great hope that a close inquiry into the strategies and habitus of youth in societies affected by long-term or recurring conflict can make great strides in being able to find locally relevant solutions to bring youth within and support processes of repair. For, "to explain any social event or pattern, one must inseparably dissect both the social constitution of the agent and the makeup of the particular social universe within which she operates as well as the particular conditions under which they come to encounter and impinge upon each other" (Wacquant, 2006, p. 8). Greater than the sum of answers to any given question, Bourdieu's classic *Outline of a Theory of a Practice* does provide a useful and practical

framework for formulating research questions and design regarding problems of the social world, including ones involving youth and conflict as context.

The main thing is that they are not to be conceptualized so much as ideas, on that level, but as a method. The core of my work lies in the method and a way of thinking. To be more precise, my method is a manner of asking questions rather than just ideas. This, I think is a critical point. (Bourdieu, 1985, quoted in Mahar, 1990, p. 33).

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