Prefatory note

The paper reprinted here grew out of a close reading of Bourdieu’s work undertaken while writing an M.A. thesis on Bourdieu at the University of Sussex in 1980. At that time, La Distinction (1979) and Le Sens pratique (1980) had just been published in French. The first statement of Bourdieu’s general theoretical stance had been translated in 1977 as Outline of a Theory of Practice, but the only other books available in English dealt with Algeria or with education. Several important articles and book chapters by Bourdieu had been published in English, but these were not widely known or readily accessible. Only a few articles about Bourdieu’s work had appeared in English. In the English-speaking world, anthropologists and sociologists of education were familiar with the work, but broader audiences in the social sciences and humanities were not.

Five years later, when the paper was published in Theory and Society, this had already begun to change. Distinction appeared in English in 1984, and wider audiences were becoming interested in Bourdieu’s work. In subsequent years, of course, virtually all of Bourdieu’s major work has become available in English, and a large secondary literature has developed. And Bourdieu’s own oeuvre continued to grow in rich new directions, yielding such important books as Homo Academicus, The State Nobility, Pascalian Meditations, and The Rules of Art.

This paper should be understood in context, then, as an early attempt in English to come to terms with Bourdieu’s work, and particularly with Distinction, through an analysis of the systematic metatheory that, I argued, informed all Bourdieu’s work up to that point.
In a subsequent paper, I adopted a different perspective on Bourdieu’s work, following Bourdieu’s lead in thinking about his theory – and about social theory more generally – in dispositional terms, i.e. in terms of a particular sociological habitus. When I first encountered Bourdieu’s work, for example, I collected a dozen or so definitions – or what I took to be definitions – of “habitus” in an attempt to pin down its precise meaning. Only later did I come to believe that Bourdieu was not so much defining as characterizing the concept of habitus in a variety of ways in order to communicate a certain theoretical stance or posture, to designate – and inculcate – a certain sociological disposition, a certain way of looking at the world. The same could be said of the other fundamental concepts: interest, capital, strategy, field, and so forth.

Thinking about theory as habitus, I suggested, enables one to think with Bourdieu about Bourdieu – and sometimes even against Bourdieu. It enables us to examine his schemes of sociological vision with the aid of those same schemes. It enables us to appropriate his theory in a practical, sociologically productive manner. As Bourdieu noted, his own work grew out of a practical appropriation of the “thinking tools” available in the sociological tradition:

> the elaboration and the transmission of effective and fertile methods of thinking have nothing to do with the flow of “ideas” such as one normally imagines it .... To understand scientific works, which unlike theoretical texts, call forth practical application and not contemplation, ... one has to make the way of thinking which is expressed [in such works] function practically à propos a different object, to reactivate it in a new act of [intellectual] production.

Confronted with Bourdieu’s own work, we would do well to seek to “master practically, by incorporating as an habitus” the thinking tools that Bourdieu made available.

It should go without saying that such a practical appropriation need not be an uncritical one. Just as Bourdieu was fond of describing his relation with “canonical” theorists in terms of “thinking with a thinker against that thinker,” so we can and should think with Bourdieu against Bourdieu. But this can best be done by appropriating his sociological dispositions, his thinking tools, making them ours and making our own use of them, testing in practice their practical productivity (along, of course, with dispositions and thinking tools appropriated from other sources).