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Managing the Tensions of Essentialism: Purity and Impurity

Abstract

This article will propose a new interpretation of Pierre Bourdieu, as a theorist of purity and impurity. Bourdieu's writings indicate that through the adjudication of things or people as relatively impure or pure an image is constructed of their essential truth. Building from Bourdieu, we will show how themes of purity and impurity can be used to manage the tensions associated with attempts to impute an essence to human nature or to reality, ensuring that moral and epistemological significance of complexity is masked. This is the reason why themes of purity and impurity so often attend polarised worldviews, and why they are frequently mobilised for justifying and operating biopolitical processes of social stratification and regulation.

Keywords: Purity, Impurity, Power, Essence, Bourdieu

Introduction

This article will draw on the work of Pierre Bourdieu to suggest a new theory of purity and impurity. These are powerful themes, which have been acknowledged to be 'under theorised' (Campkin 2007: 79). The central claim that will be put forward is that purity and impurity should be interpreted as an assessment of the correspondence of a phenomenon with its essence. A pure person or thing is, in short, *self-identical*. The Zinc in front of you is pure if it is completely comprised of Zinc, as one of the basic Mendeleevian elements. The citizen in front of you is racially pure if you believe that he instantiates solely the nation, as a biological and cultural essence. To jump for pure joy is to jump in a way that manifests no other animating principle, that corresponds simply and truly to the emotion 'joy' that stands behind and within its instantiations. What makes purity and impurity such significant discourses, Bourdieu's writings show, is that they can be used to performatively construct the essence against which they merely appear to compare phenomena or forms of subjectivity. To call you a 'dirty slut', for example, is not simply a categorisation of you as an individual, but also imputes an essence to femininity from which your behaviour indicates you have departed.

Perhaps the main theory of purity and impurity currently available to scholars in the social sciences and humanities for considering the topic is Mary Douglas' ([1966] 2002) *Purity and Danger*. Douglas claims that classifications of purity and impurity are activated by an innate ordering mechanism in the human mind and help to preserve the social order of society as a whole, by marking that which is 'anomalous' to this order as impure. Douglas suggested that themes of impurity become attached, as a 'spontaneous by-product' of an instinctual human drive for order, to that which is 'rejected from our normal scheme of classification' ([1966] 2002: 45, 50; [1968] 1975: 58). She presents a functionalist account, that this process operates for the overall 'advantage of society at large' ([1966] 2002: 48, 168).

Yet there have been repeated calls for further theoretical reflections on the topic of purity and impurity beyond *Purity and Danger,* including from Douglas herself. Since the publication of *Purity and Danger,* a variety of scholars across the social sciences have criticised Douglas' theory for making unmediated explanatory links between categorical systems and the social structure of society as a totality. Valeri (2000: 71) posits, for example, that bypassing the realm of social practices leads *Purity and Danger* 'to speak of "the system", of "form", or of "order" as if they were one monolithic thing'. In fact, 'there are many coexisting orders of classification; what is residual to one may be central to another'. Each of these orders of classification is marked by a dynamic interplay of relations of power. Purity and impurity are not the result of a single homeostatic process (Valeri 2000: 71). Hetherington (2004) also criticises Douglas' theory in ways that that agree with Valeri. He argues that the anomaly theory of purity and impurity offers a flawed analysis of processes of categorisation. This has been largely because Douglas presumes that the classificatory system is 'a stable and representable thing', and prior to the anomalies that it designates. As a result, she 'misses the ongoing way in which order is made as uncertain process' (2004: 163).

Douglas ([1990] 1996; 1991; 1992) herself agreed with her critics that the two central issues with the anomaly theory which cause its flawed account of power and categorisation were the assumption that society is a unitary whole, and the assumption that there exists a unitary 'ordering' mechanism within the human mind. In an informal seminar in 1997, Douglas retracted both assumptions. Furthermore, as a logical consequence of these retractions, Douglas further admitted that there is no universal, 'intrinsic value to purity' for either the individual or for society: 'the only thing universalistic about purity is the tendency to use it as a weapon or tool' (Douglas 1997). Douglas herself concluded that there exists a pressing need for further social theoretical reflections on the topic. The subsequent year,

Douglas publically retracted the claim that there is a universal human or societal urge for a complete and ordered cognitive system. She asserted that the most common response to social or cognitive anomalies tends to be simply to 'tolerate ambiguity' (Douglas & Ney 1998: 15).

Taking a more historicist approach than Douglas to the topic, in *Moral Purity and Persecution in History* (2000), Barrington Moore Jr. insists upon the foundational importance of themes of purity and impurity to the form taken by Western civilisation. He suggests that, from their biblical origins, these concepts have indelibly shaped Western society, contributing to intolerance and extremism through the absolutist world-view that they mandate. He expresses exasperation that, given their pressing importance, purity and impurity have received so little attention from social scientists and social theorists. He contends that the Western notions of purity and impurity have served as an 'indispensible' antecedent to moral catastrophes such as the Wars of Religion in the sixteenth century and the rise of Nazism and Stalinism in the twentieth century (2000: 26, 132).

Whilst we do not wish to follow Moore in suggesting that discourses of purity and impurity have endured over millennia at the beating heart of a Western civilisation, we do think that they have great importance for many modern Western societies. In this article we will present a new interpretation of Bourdieu's writings, excavating an account of purity and impurity. Other theorists could have been chosen. Elsewhere one of us have examined the work of Kristeva, Girard and Agamben, considering their contributions to the social theory of purity and impurity. Other contemporary thinkers have also looked for resources for theorising the topic of purity and impurity. Karakayali (2006), for example, recommends Simmel's work on the figure of the 'stranger' as apposite to the study of representations of dirt and impurity. We have chosen to engage in an interpretation of Bourdieu here because of what we see as his particular acuity in examining the role played by discourses of purity and impurity in the differentiation of both fields of practice and forms of subjectivity. He does not examine the stark dichotomy between 'us' and 'strangers', as do Kristeva, Girard, Agamben and Karakayali. Instead, he explores the incremental classification of subjects, embedded within a plurality of fields at any given time, as pure or impure. Prior commentators on Bourdieu have failed to draw out his insights into this topic, however; as Fowler (1997: 64) rightly states, these insights often remain at the level of 'hints' in Bourdieu's texts. Yet, as we aim to demonstrate, interpretation could productively bring this theme into focal attention.

Purity, impurity and practice

In 'The Genesis and Structure of the Religious Field', Bourdieu presents a general account of the origin of purity and impurity discourses. He hypothesises that appeal to a realm that transcends ordinary life initially occurred through 'magic' before the advent of institutionally organised religion. He follows Weber in defining magic as the direct attempt to master nature through symbolic practices for the purposes of immediate utility ([1971a] 1991: 13 cf. Weber [1922] 1968: 399-400, 403). He suggests that in early agricultural societies, everyday life was firmly embedded in nature, with its cyclical patterns, spatial dispersion and immediate needs. This worked against the production of abstract rationalised thought, and hence against a separate cultural field for organised religion. Drawing on Marx and Engel's description of structural differentiation in *The German Ideology* ([1845] 1994), Bourdieu proposes that the emergence of the city and with it an early form of the division of labour meant that 'consciousness is in a position to emancipate itself from the world and to proceed to the formation of 'pure' theory, theology, philosophy, morality, etc.' ([1971a] 1991: 6, citing Marx & Engels [1845] 1994: 130; cf. Fowler 2011). Following this line of reasoning, Bourdieu theorises that appeals to moral purity are facilitated by the material and practical differentiation of social fields. Yet following Weber ([1922] 1968: 536-40), Bourdieu treats the relations between religious professionals, between professionals and the laity, and between the laity, as crucial for the production of discourses of moral purity and impurity. Whereas functionalist perspectives treat purity and impurity discourses as a unmediated reflection of society as ordered or in chaos, Bourdieu argues strongly that this position misses out the role played by *social practices* within relatively differentiated fields as a crucial intermediary factor ([1997] 2000: 117).

According to Bourdieu, the 'systematisation and moralisation of religious practices and representations' to form organised religion as an arena of social practice, was associated with a 'transfer of the notion of purity from the magic order to the moral order' ([1971a] 1991: 8). Whereas magic had operated through the unsystematic enactment of rites and prohibitions which appealed to purity and impurity, the relatively autonomous religious field became structured by a continual discursive appeal to the essence of the world. Modelling his account on Chapter 7 of Weber's ([1921] 1963) *Ancient Judaism*, which describes the 'monopoly' the priesthood possess on access to salvation, Bourdieu argues that the priesthood have a monopoly on the legitimate appeal to God. This monopoly operates

through theological discourses appealing to purity and impurity as symbols of sin and redemption, which grant the priests a continuous authority over the laity ([1971b] 1987: 123):

> Religion contributes to the (hidden) imposition of the principles of structuration of the perception and thinking of the world, and of the social world in particular, insofar as it imposes a system of practices and representations whose structure, objectively founded on the principle of political division, presents itself as the natural-supernatural structure of the cosmos (Bourdieu [1971a] 1991: 5).

The religious field comes to define itself through the 'repression of worldly interests (economic but also sexual)', such that these factors continue to operate, but in a masked form that is understood to express a 'purer meaning' ([1971a] 1991: 21, 9).

Bourdieu's analysis of the religious field suggests that the particular appeals that facilitate purity and impurity discourses are those that impute an 'essence' as the ground for reality. Comparing the artistic and religious fields, Bourdieu, for instance suggests that both are places in which competition occurs over the control and definition of phenomena taken to express 'the origin, the spirit, the authentic essence' ([1976] 1993: 74). Bourdieu is attuned to the fact that purity may mean different things in different contexts: there are a variety of essences against which to compare phenomena (beauty, truth, goodness, intention, etc.). However, Bourdieu's writings also indicate certain commonalities between regions of practice where essence is invoked. We need to be careful in suggesting such an interpretation; Hacking (1999: 17) has pointed out that the term 'essence' has become a 'slur word', making its meaning unclear. The essences that we wish to identify as particularly associated with the operation of purity and impurity discourses do not contain any heterogeneous, foreign or inferior elements; all of their elements are 'the same' in some relevant sense. Furthermore, the essences in question are understood to be situated at the conceptual or ontological ground of their instantiations. Besides his consideration of the religious field, where this account first appears, this is especially visible in his analysis of the field of cultural production and consumption.

Written in 1971, the same year as 'Genesis and Structure of the Religious Field', Bourdieu's essay 'The Market of Symbolic Goods' ([1971c] 1993) applies this analysis of the relatively differentiated religious field to cultural practices more generally. Like the religious field, spheres of cultural practice are separated in Western societies as relatively autonomous realms through the development of a 'public of potential consumers' and 'an ever-growing,

ever more diversified corps of producers', as well as 'the multiplication and diversification of agencies of consecration' ([1971c] 1993: 112). In particular, Bourdieu documents the discourses of purity and impurity that arose as the result of the emergence of modern high culture, the domain of elite cultural production and consumption. As techniques of mass production proliferated, in 'reaction' to 'the pressures of an anonymous market', from around 1830 the Romantic movement in Europe proposed an 'ideology of free, disinterested "creation"'. The artist came to be constructed as a pure 'creative genius', as were those dominant consumers 'whose understanding of works of art presupposes' a similar elevated and purified form of existence ([1971c] 1993: 114).

Cultural goods that position themselves against the popular, 'are 'pure' because they demand of the receiver a specifically aesthetic disposition' ([1971c] 1993: 119-20). They are rare precisely to the degree that the disposition and knowledge to decipher their meaning is rare, and valuable because they serve to consecrate more broadly the social and political power possessed by those with this disposition. The classificatory social and cultural structures of the field of practice thereby serve as a 'system of conservation and cultural consecration' separating different consuming publics from one another in lifestyle, and seemingly in their very nature ([1971c] 1993: 122). Thus even sexuality – which Bourdieu sees as generally coded as impure in the first instance – is an effective site for demonstrating elevation and refinement of taste for those whose cultural capital permits such displays, for example in the form of an elevated 'pure love' or a 'purely' aesthetic relation with an artwork with a sexual theme ([1979] 1984: 80). The products of the field of cultural production can be mobilised as *symbolic capital*: cultural resources that serve to tacitly naturalise relations of cultural and material stratification in society ([1979] 1984: 382; [1997] 2000: 240-2). The strong association between symbolic capital and purity in Western societies is caused by the fact that a common way in which these cultural resources naturalise relations of power is through making forms of subjectivity appear to be no more than the expression of or 'phototropic' orientation towards essence – such as adoration in the religious field or in love relations, or knowledge in the educational and academic fields.

Though Bourdieu's main focus is social class, he also explores purity and impurity discourses in relation to gender. Generalising from his fieldwork in Algeria in the 1950s to contemporary Western societies, Bourdieu ([1998a] 2001: 28) suggests that the 'demeanour which is imposed on Kabyle women [in Algeria] is the limiting case of what is still imposed on women, even today, as much in the United States as in Europe'. Bourdieu suggests that women are situated as a 'source from which impurity and dishonour threaten to enter', with

the purity of cultivated feminine nature always at risk of being breached by either an *inner tendency* or an *external vulnerability* to impurity. The construction of the feminine as either pure or impure legitimates masculine possession, protection and control of women to ensure that impurity does not enter; masculinity is situated as relatively pure – and this relative purity serves as a tacit norm against which the purity or impurity of women are compared ([1998a] 2001: 20, 51; [1972] 1977: 60-1; cf. Mottier 2002).

Such generalisations in Bourdieu's work between Algerian and contemporary Western societies have been criticised by commentators (e.g. Calhoun 1993; Witz 2004; Bennett 2005; Urban 2005; Dianteill 2005). Yet alongside such generalisation, in Bourdieu, is recognition of the way that discourses of purity and impurity have been marked by the particular history of Western societies. Bourdieu suggests that purity and impurity should be understood as 'concepts originally developed in the theological tradition' of Christianity, which have been strategically 'imported' into the operation of other Western cultural fields in ideals of beauty, truth, morality, the natural, and so on ([1961] 1962: 110-1; [1992b] 1996: 294; [1998a] 2001: 86, 176). These re-worked theological notions serve a concrete need in the present, 'converting the theology of grace into a worldly, "society" ideology of good grace' and thus pinning moral responsibility for social success or failure on to the individual subject ([2005] 2008: 11; Bourdieu & Passeron [1970] 1977: 129).

Bourdieu's advance

Douglas theorised purity as an expression and affirmation of social order, and impurity as an expression of 'matter out of place'. Bourdieu, however, argues explicitly against the 'reductionist theory' which treats 'discourse' as 'the direct reflection of social structures' contained in society, conceptualised as a single whole ([1971a] 1991: 5; [1999] 2011: 119; cf. Robbins 2003). On our interpretation of Bourdieu, purity and impurity discourses are not the reflection of social structures: mediating between the discourses and embedded social forms are the strategic discursive practices of different relational subjects, acting within fields in which competing visions of 'the origin, the spirit, the authentic essence' are precisely a stake in this interaction (Bourdieu [1976] 1993: 74).

In the cultural field, purity and impurity discourses are strategically mobilised in the affirmation of the specificity of the cultural field as a domain oriented towards essence, in the course of strategic social practice. The cultural field itself is characterised as pure, compared to the economic field which is characterised as impure; those areas of culture which are most

oriented towards 'the origin, the spirit, the authentic essence' are constructed as pure than others; and those regions of the field most proximate to this essence are seen as purer than those that are considered as worldly, and distant from this originary essence. Purity and impurity hierarchies may therefore come into conflict, simply bypass, or nest within one another, depending upon the various ways in which essence is appealed to within social fields.

For instance, discourses invoking purity and impurity may be deployed by prophets and other ideologues, for example, against the compromises that consecrated authorities must make. They may also be deployed by these consecrated authorities themselves, in order to designate as defiled those activities which do not correspond to what is thereby imputed as the proper form of human life (see [1971a] 1991: 32). In the political sphere, for example, Bourdieu ([1981] 1991: 189) describes a dichotomy and structural conflict between ideologues and pragmatists, 'those people, that is, who thus advocate a return to basics, to a restoration of the original purity; and, on the other hand, those people who are inclined to seek a strengthening of the party'. Or again, Bourdieu ([1984a] 1988: 62) describes the opposition between two poles of academia. The applied faculties such as law and medicine affirm the public utility of the academic field. Those faculties dedicated to 'pure, rational knowledge' such as mathematics, or philosophy, affirm the autonomy of the academic field as oriented towards the disinterested search for the truth of existence.

Bourdieu's theory has been criticised for over-emphasising the division between cultural producers and cultural consumers, and thus for focusing too strongly on intra-institutional dynamics (e.g. Hervieu-Léger [1993] 2000: 110-1; Born 2008). Whilst this issue does mark Bourdieu's texts on the religious, cultural and political fields, it is questionable whether it concretely impacts upon the interpretation we present of Bourdieu's account of purity and impurity classifications. On this reading, purity and impurity discourses are both facilitated by and contribute to the emergence of institutionalised fields able to facilitate sustained discourses on the truth of reality, and on the extent to which particular phenomena or forms of subjectivity are in correspondence with this ideal. This reading of Bourdieu circumvents a certain strand in his thought which makes discourses of purity and impurity the necessary effect of the structural differentiation of relatively institutionalised social practice. The citation from Marx and Engel's *The German Ideology*, and certain other passages in 'The Genesis and Structure of the Religious Field' (e.g. [1971a] 1991: 8), imply a structurally determinist account. In such an account, discourses such as purity and impurity would be no more than reflections of the relative *autonomy* of a field of social practice. Yet Bourdieu can

also be read as indicating that classifications occur within various, sometimes competing, discourses, rather than representing the super-structural reflection of material conditions. In a later interview, Bourdieu ([1999] 2011: 115-6) affirms that this was his intended point in 'The Genesis and Structure of the Religious Field', and that it represents the most important lesson that he feels that he learnt from Weber.

On such a reading of Bourdieu, the material division of labour represented by the relative autonomy of fields does not 'spontaneously' or mechanically produce purity and impurity discourses. For instance, the field of cultural production, the scientific field, and the field of national sovereignty do not naturally and inevitably produce corresponding discourses of purity and impurity. The reason why they are often associated with such discourses is that at stake in each of these relatively autonomous fields is an appeal to an essence; in these cases beauty, truth and the nation as a timeless truth of collective identity. Crucial for purity and impurity discourses is less the autonomy of the field than the appeal to an essence that is often associated with established, autonomous fields which have the authority to shape forms of subjectivity that are willing to make and recognise claims about the truth of existence. Thus in *The Rules of Art*, Bourdieu argues:

> If there is a truth, it is that truth is at stake in the struggle; and even though the divergent or antagonistic classifications or judgements made by agents engaged in the artistic field are indisputably determined or oriented by specific dispositions and interests linked to their positions in the field and to points of view, they are nevertheless formulated in the name of a pretention to universality, to absolute judgement, which is the very negation of the relativity of points of view. 'Essentialist thought' is at work in all social universes and especially in the fields of cultural production – the religious field, the scientific field, the literary field, the artistic field, the legal field, etc. – where games which have the universal at stake are played out. But it is quite clear in that case that 'essences' are norms ([1992b] 1996: 298-9; see also [1997] 2000: 114).

Purity and power

A concern that has been raised regarding Bourdieu's work generally relates to his view of the relationship between structure and agency. There has been a sustained debate in the literature on Bourdieu, regarding whether he believes that social structures are

constraining or whether agency is possible (see McNay 2004). Whilst in some texts, Bourdieu does indeed seem to argue against the possibility of meaningful agency for most subjects (e.g. [1976] 1993: 73-4; Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992a: 133), elsewhere he is insistent that practices are not simply the result of 'rules' which subjects follow or express, but the result of strategic agency by social and institutional actors ([1972] 1977: 120; 1986a: 111). On the topic of purity and impurity discourses, Bourdieu's argument is quite clear: they tend to support incumbent relations of material and cultural power, but this does not preclude their successful use by actors for achieving greater agency or substantial social change (see [1992b] 1996: 342). Bourdieu suggests that 'the more people are... rich in specific capital, the more likely they are to resist' cooption by right-wing interests ([1996a] 1998: 61-2, 70). Representations of purity tend to support the hierarchies of the social field and society at large by serving as symbolic capital, naturalising forms of subjectivity so that they appear to be no more than expressions of an imputed essence. Yet they can also serve as a legitimation strategy through which particular actors can offer social critique. It is possible, Bourdieu theorises, that 'in the name of the values of purity, freedom, truth... I can enter the political field', campaigning for 'reason, truth, virtue' ([1995a] 2005: 46; [1997] 2000: 123; cf. [1998b] 1998: 95-6; [2001] 2003).

Bourdieu suggests that the political potency of such representations of purity in the public domain is, in part, because the economic and political fields are socially constructed in contemporary Western societies as impure: 'The order of the *polis* and politics' is always seen as opposed to 'the "free" and "pure"' ([1997] 2000: 15, 94). Those rich in cultural rather than material capital are oriented towards 'cultivated cults of the natural, the pure and the authentic' ([1979] 1984: 218-220). Bourdieu ([1986b] 1993: 165) calls these subjects 'the dominated of the dominant', since they are less powerful than the economically and politically dominant, whose forms of subjectivity are legitimated as dominant through their consumption of the goods of the fields of cultural production. Bourdieu ([1979] 1984: 511) thus writes of the 'boundary which distinguishes the pure reign of art and culture from the lower region of the social and of politics, a distinction which is the very source of the effects of symbolic domination exerted by or in the name of culture'.

Dominant actors strive for and exercise their power, but occlude and legitimate these actions through the mobilisation of what Bourdieu refers to as 'ideals', produced and sustained in the first instance by other, 'purer' fields ([1981] 1991: 202; [1997] 2000: 96). Such interaction between the purity and impurity discourses of different fields is missed by Douglas, and represents a crucial advance made by Bourdieu's account. Bourdieu proposes

that dominant subjects gain legitimacy as social elites by discursively constructing themselves as representatives and guardians of these pure and transcendent ideals: 'I am nothing but the delegate of God or the People, but that in whose name I speak is everything, and on this account I am everything' ([1983b] 1991: 210-1; [1995b] 1999: 25; cf. [1998a] 2001: 87-8). Discourses invoking purity can thereby be used to legitimate programmes of action, and to impose a particular vision of the world on the national citizenry via 'the statist capital granting power over the different species of capital and over their reproduction' ([1991] 1998: 41-2; see also [1980a] 1991:47; 1987: 819, 824; 2004: 26). The relative and vicarious proximity of the dominant to essence is 'unmarked' and so appears to subjects as a 'universal' potential, a 'neutral', 'natural' norm and ideal ([1998a] 2001: 122; Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992a: 167). This is perhaps what Douglas was identifying in suggesting that purity functions as a symbol of society as a whole; however, Bourdieu identifies the intersecting power-relations upon which such a function depends.

Such a process can be seen in Bourdieu's discussion in *The State Nobility* ([1989] 1996) of 'pure activities, that is, activities that have been purified of all profane, pragmatic, and profitable purpose' (e.g. certain amateur sports, forms of music, debating, ancient languages). These pure activities are available in elite educational institutions, and demonstrate 'the qualities of disinterestedness and endurance'. These qualities show that a subject is able to exercise 'control over nature, that is to say, over those who cannot control their nature': the ability to rule oneself serves as a mandate to rule others ([1989] 1996: 110-1, citing Durkheim [1912] 2001: 235). Mastery of the cultural realm as the domain of 'the pure' makes social power and authoritative forms of knowledge the seemingly natural possession of the dominant elite, granting them a tacit and relative purity (Bourdieu [1980b] 1991: 85; [1989] 1996: 102-3, 110; cf. Bourdieu & Passeron [1970] 1977: 119). Bourdieu theorises that dominant subjects in contemporary Western societies are represented as possessing a tacit and relative purity. By contrast, an impure subject-position is relatively attributed across human society, depending on properties like class and gender and the way in which these are enacted with propriety or impropriety in the domain of consumption. Impure forms of subjectivity may seem to represent no more than that which is extraneous to a fully-human, 'proper' subject-position. However, Bourdieu's account suggests that such a figure may in fact be part of the means through which this subject-position is socially and materially constructed and made to seem 'proper' and pre-given.

Bourdieu's account of themes of purity and impurity shows the important role they play in the processes through which contemporary Western societies continually construct 'a

whole relationship to animal nature, to primary needs and the populace who indulge in them without restraint', such as women and the working-classes ([1972] 1977: 196; [1998a] 2001: 79). Though appearing as the expression of their 'impure nature', the actions and capacities of the dominated are in fact, Bourdieu insists, shaped by their materially subordinate position. This position practically necessitates association with matters classified by the dominant culture as impure, such as physical labour, dirt, and lasciviousness ([1979] 1984: 386-7; [1998a] 2001: 31-3). Bourdieu writes of the dominant:

> They reduce the strength which the dominated (or the young, or women) ascribe to themselves to brute strength, passion and instinct, a blind, unpredictable force of nature, the unreasoning violence of desire, and they attribute to themselves spiritual and intellectual strength, a self-control that predisposes them to control others ([1979] 1984: 479).

On our reading, Bourdieu's writings suggest that one of the fundamental properties of discourses of purity and impurity is that they hide their relationship with dynamic relations of power and materiality (see [1991] 1998: 60). What is the mechanism through which this takes place? Though Bourdieu does not draw this out explicitly, we wish to suggest that when phenomena or forms of subjectivity are taken to be unadulterated, simple expressions of their essence – that is, as pure – they tend to be granted a moral and epistemological privilege. With no heterogeneous processes impacting upon the existence of the phenomena or form of subjectivity, it appears that only a universal and immutable essence stands as the ground of a phenomenon or a particular form of subjectivity. Bourdieu proposes that those who are dominant within a field, and within society more generally, can hide the historicity and the power-relations upon which their position in society depends by presenting themselves as no more than delegates of an ideal of essence. This legitimates their place in society, and situates their attributes and ethos as the universal norm. Rather than expressing and re-affirming society as a collective entity, the mobilisation of purity and impurity discourses is structured by hierarchies both within and beyond particular cultural fields as differentiated realms of social life: 'the most "pure" products, "pure" art or "pure" science' serve what would otherwise be considered the 'totally "impure" social functions', most notably 'distinction and social discrimination or, more subtly, the function of a disavowal of the social world which is inscribed' ([1992b] 1996: 249).

Douglas proposes representations of purity and impurity as an unmediated expression of the maintenance or breach of any social or cognitive categories that reflect the general social structure. Designations of purity and impurity regarding the boundaries of the body, Douglas therefore argues, always mirror the internal and external social and symbolic boundaries of society as a pre-given 'bounded system' ([1966] 2002: 142). Examining virginity, Douglas ([1966] 2002: 200-1) argued that it will inevitably be coded as pure since 'the yearning for rigidity is in us all'. She explains that by this she means that through the figure of the virgin, we can 'enjoy purity at second hand', experiencing this state which we all inherently desire vicariously in the untainted body of the virgin. The more general fact that themes of impurity seem to 'cluster' particularly around both sexuality and femininity is explained by Douglas ([1966] 2002: 194) as simply natural to human societies, as she does not believe that it can be adequately accounted for using her theory.

By contrast, on the account presented here, purity and impurity should be regarded as discourses that measure phenomena vis-à-vis an imputed essence, considered to be the self-identical ground for true phenomena in the world. Impurity is invoked to classify those elements that particular discursive actors are unwilling or unable to place as expressions of the particular construction of essence. Representations of purity and impurity can thus serve to bridge the gap between ostensibly natural and discrete phenomena or forms of subjectivity, whilst facilitating mechanisms of social stratification and of social and self-regulation. Thus femininity and sexuality should not be regarded as natural and inevitable sites of purity and impurity classifications; a social theory that suggests such risks affirming rather than providing tools for the analysis of misogyny, as Buckley and Gottlieb (1998) have claimed. Rather, we wish to contend, female sexuality is often described using purity/impurity classifications because it is a key biopolitical object, able to be regulated and normalised through appeal to an ideal of human essence. For instance, the division between pure and impure forms of female sexual subjectivity is an apparatus which serves to manage and mask the contingencies that attend the material and discursive construction of racial identities as essences. In order to appear to be an essence underpinning particular human instances, 'race' is indelibly dependent upon the exigencies of the reproductive choices of its members who therefore must be subject to self-regulation and social policing. 'Race' appears to be a trans-historical essence that is merely instantiated by each generation of the nation; however, in fact the race is indelibly dependent upon the exigencies of the reproductive choices of its members who therefore must be subject to self-regulation and social policing.

Concluding reflections

As Douglas predicts in *Purity and Danger*, pure phenomena can sometimes appear to symbolise the order and benevolence of society, and the impure its disequilibrium or disruption by anomaly. Bourdieu himself ([1979] 1984: 474-5) maintains that there is a tendency in contemporary Western societies to exclude 'all misalliances and all unnatural unions – i.e. all unions contrary to the common classification, to the *diacrisis* (separation) which is the basis of collective and individual identity'. Yet not all exclusions are classified as impure, and not all that is within social or cognitive bounds is classified as pure. Our reading of Bourdieu suggests a new theory of purity and impurity: purity should be conceptualised as the adjudication of phenomena in terms of their relative identity with or divergence from their imputed essence. Bourdieu may focus on the economic processes that are euphemised in the cultural activities of social actors, but his point regarding the role played by purity and impurity can be extended to a variety of cases. It can be suggested, based on his account, that discourses of purity and impurity are mobilised to *manage the practical tensions* associated with the construction of particular subjects or phenomena as relatively corresponding to an imputed ideal, standing outside of history or relations of power.

Through the discursive adjudication of phenomena or subjects as relatively impure or pure, an image is constructed of what these phenomena or subjects are in their truth. Impurity does not spontaneously characterise any anomaly, as Douglas predicts, but is invoked to classify those elements that particular discursive actors are unwilling or unable to place as expressions of an imputed essence. In contrast to Douglas who sees power as only ever operating to ensure the homeostatic stability of the social and cognitive structure of the community as a whole, our reading of Bourdieu has suggested that pure processes, things, or people appear to be simple expressions of essence, with no dependence on anything outside of themselves. They are devoid of and prior to complexity and the dynamics that organise social and material inequalities. This makes purity and impurity a discursive, material and affective resource peculiarly adapted to facilitating social consensus, and compelling a shared practical demand to protect or attain purity through the deployment of mechanisms of social exclusion, and social and self-regulation. Purity and impurity, therefore, help manage and mask the tensions that would otherwise become apparent when an essence is imputed at the ground of particular phenomena or forms of subjectivity, as the impure is held epistemologically and morally responsible for the distance of reality from its essential truth. It

is this operation which facilitates the mobilisation, identified by Moore (2000), of purity and impurity discourses in the justification of black-and-white and dehumanising world-views.

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