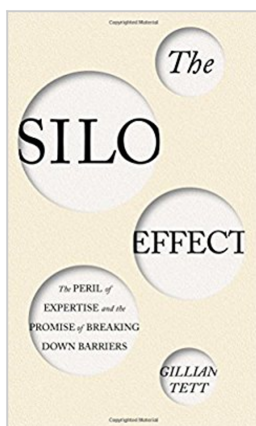

The Silo Effect: The Peril of Expertise and the Promise of Breaking Down Barriers

By Gillian Tett

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From award-winning columnist and journalist Gillian Tett comes a brilliant examination of how our tendency to create functional departments—silos—hinders our work…and how some people and organizations can break those silos down to unleash innovation.

One of the characteristics of industrial age enterprises is that they are organized around functional departments. This organizational structure results in both limited information and restricted thinking. *The Silo Effect* asks these basic questions: why do humans working in modern institutions collectively act in ways that sometimes seem stupid? Why do normally clever people fail to see risks and opportunities that later seem blindingly obvious? Why, as psychologist Daniel Kahneman put it, are we sometimes so “blind to our own blindness”?

Gillian Tett, journalist and senior editor for the *Financial Times*, answers these questions by plumbing her background as an anthropologist and her experience reporting on the financial crisis in 2008. In *The Silo Effect*, she shares eight different tales of the silo syndrome, spanning Bloomberg’s City Hall in New York, the Bank of England in London, Cleveland Clinic hospital in Ohio, UBS bank in Switzerland, Facebook in San Francisco, Sony in Tokyo, the BlueMountain hedge fund, and the Chicago police. Some of these narratives illustrate how foolishly people can behave when they are mastered by silos. Others, however, show how institutions and individuals can master their silos instead. These are stories of failure *and* success.

From ideas about how to organize office spaces and lead teams of people with disparate expertise, Tett lays bare the silo effect and explains how people organize themselves, interact with each other, and imagine the world can take hold of an organization and lead from institutional blindness to 20/20 vision.

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Editorial Review

Review
Praise for THE SILO EFFECT

“Highly intelligent, enjoyable and enlivened by a string of vivid case studies. It is also genuinely important, because her prescription for curing the pathological silo-isation of business and government isr efreshingly unorthodox and, in my view, convincing.” ***—Financial Times***

“A complex topic and lively writing make this an enjoyable call to action for better integration within organizations.”***— Publishers Weekly***

"In“The Silo Effect” she applies her anthropologist’s lens to the problem of why so many organizations still suffer from a failure to communicate. It’s a profound idea, richly analyzed."***— The Wall Street Journal***

"’Silo’has become a cliché among management consultants—and executives trying to hang onto their jobs by speaking the language of the *au courant*—but Tett gives the metaphor life in her engaging, case-study-filled new book.” ***—New York Post***

“*The Silo Effect* comes across in print much as Tett comes across in person—sharp, insightful, and concise. And the book, which is informed as much by her training as an academic anthropologist as by her experience covering the global financial crisis, is an excellent attempt to help both organizations and individuals figure out how to harness the benefits of specialization without creating tunnel vision.”***—Strategy+Business***

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The Silo Effect

1

THE NONDANCERS

How Anthropology Can Illuminate Silos

“Every established order tends to make its own entirely arbitrary system seem entirely natural.”

—Pierre Bourdieu1

IT WAS A DARK WINTER’S evening in 1959 in Béarn, a tiny village in a remote corner of South West France. In a brightly lit hall, a Christmas dance was under way. Dozens of young men and women were gyrating to 1950s jive music. The women wore full skirts that swirled around them, the men sharp, close-cut suits.2 On the edge of the crowd, Pierre Bourdieu, a Frenchman in his thirties with an intense, craggy face, stood watching, taking photographs and careful mental notes. In some senses, he was at “home” in that dancehall: he had grown up in the valley many years earlier, the son of peasants, and spoke Gascon, a local dialect of French that was impossible for Parisians to understand. But in other senses, Bourdieu was an outsider: as a precociously brilliant child, he had left the village two decades earlier on a scholarship, and studied at an elite university in Paris. Then he traveled to Algeria, serving as a soldier in the brutal civil war, before becoming an academic.

That gave him an odd insider-outsider status. He knew the dancers’ world well, but he was no longer merely a creature of this tiny environment. He could imagine a universe beyond Béarn and a different way of arranging a dance. And when he looked around at that hall, with that insider-outsider vision, he could see something to which his own friends were blind. In the center of the hall, there was light and action: the dancers were doing the jive. That was the only thing that the villagers wanted to watch, or would ever remember from that night. Dance halls, after all, are supposed to be all about dancing. But “standing at the edge of the dancing area, forming a dark mass, a group of older men look[ed] on in silence,” as Bourdieu later wrote. “All aged about thirty, they wear berets and unfashionably cut dark suits. As if drawn in by the temptation to join the dance, they move forward, narrowing the space left for the dancers . . . but do not dance.”3 That part of the hall was not what people were supposed to watch; it was being ignored. But it was nevertheless present, as much as the dancers. “There they all are, all the bachelors!” Bourdieu observed. The people in that hall had somehow divided themselves and classified each other into two camps. There were dancers and non-dancers.

But why had that separation occurred? Bourdieu had received a clue to the answer a few days earlier, when he met up with an old school friend. At one point, the man had produced an ancient prewar photo, depicting their classmates as children. “My fellow pupil, by then a low-ranking clerk in the neighbouring town, commented on [the photo], pitilessly intoning ‘un-marriageable!’ with reference to almost half [the pictures],”4 Bourdieu wrote. It was not intended as an insult, but as a description. Numerous men in the village were finding it impossible to find wives, because they had become unattractive—at least as culturally defined by local women.

This “unmarriageable” problem reflected radical economic change. Until the early twentieth century, most of the families around Béarn were farmers, and their eldest sons were typically the most powerful and wealthy men, as they inherited the farms according to local tradition. Eldest sons were thus considered catches for local women, particularly compared to the younger sons who often had to leave the land in search of a living. But in postwar France, the pattern had changed: agriculture was declining and the men who could leave the farms were seeking better paid jobs in town. Many young women were moving to the cities in search of work. The older sons, who were tethered by tradition to the farms, were being left behind. On a day-to-day

basis, the villagers did not articulate that distinction. But the classification system was constantly being expressed and reinforced in a host of tiny, seemingly mundane, cultural symbols that had come to seem natural. To the villagers in Béarn it seemed obvious that 1950s jive music, full skirts and tight male suits, were a cool, urban phenomenon; if you could dance, that signaled that you were part of the modern world, and therefore marriageable.

What really intrigued Bourdieu, though, was not just why this economic change had occurred, but why anyone accepted this classification system and the unspoken cultural norms. This distinction between marriageable and unmarriageable men—or people who could or could not jive—had not been imposed in any formal manner. Nobody had conducted a public debate on the matter. There were no official rules in 1950s France that banned farmers from doing the jive or stopped them from learning the dance steps, buying a few suits, and just jumping into the ring. But somehow those men were banning themselves: they had voluntarily placed themselves in a social category that indicated they "could not dance." And the implications for those men were heartbreaking. "I think of an old school friend, whose almost feminine tact and refinement endeared him to me," Bourdieu observed, noting that his friend "had chalked on the stable door the birthdates of his mares and the girls' names he had given them" as a sad protest against his "unmarriageable" state and lonely life.5

So why didn't the men protest against their tragic state? Why not just start dancing? And why didn't the girls realize that they were ignoring half the men? Why, in fact, do any human beings accept the classification systems we inherit from our surroundings? Especially when these social norms and categories are potentially damaging?

A POSTWAR DANCE HALL in Béarn lies a long way from Bloomberg's City Hall, in terms of geography and culture. Marriage strategies do not have much in common with banks. But in another sense, French peasants and New York bureaucrats are inextricably linked. What these two worlds share in common—along with every society that anthropologists have ever studied—is a tendency to use formal and informal classification systems and cultural rules to sort the world into groups and silos. Sometimes we do this in a formal manner, with diagrams and explicit rules. But we often do it amid thousands of tiny, seemingly irrelevant cultural traditions, rules, symbols, and signals that we barely notice because they are so deeply ingrained in our environment and psyche. Indeed, these cultural norms are so woven into the fabric of our daily lives that they make the classification system we use seem so natural and inevitable that we rarely think about it at all.

Insofar as anyone can tell, this process of classification is an intrinsic part of being human. It is one of the things that separate us from animals. There is a good reason for that: on a day-to-day basis, we are all surrounded by so much complexity that our brains could not think or interact if we were could not create some order by classifying the world into manageable chunks. The seemingly trivial issue of telephone numbers helps to illustrates this. Back in the 1950s, a psychology professor at Harvard named George Miller studied how short-term memory worked among people who operated telegraph systems and telephones. This research showed that there is a natural limit to how many pieces of data a human brain can remember when it is shown a list of digits or letters.6 Miller believed that this natural limit ranged between five and nine data points, but the average was "the magic number seven." Other psychologists subsequently suggested it is nearer to four. Either way, his conclusion also contained a crucial caveat: if the brain learns to "chunk" data, by sorting it into groups—akin to the process of creating a mental filing cabinet—more information can be retained. Thus if we visualize numbers as chunks of digits we retain them, but not if they are a single unbroken series of numbers. "A man just beginning to learn radiotelegraphic code hears each dit and dah as a separate chunk. [But] soon he is able to organize these sounds into letters and then he can deal with the letters as chunks . . . [then] as words, which are still larger chunks, and [then] he begins to hear whole

phrases,"7 Miller explained. "Recoding is an extremely powerful weapon for increasing the amount of information that we can deal with."

This process applies to longer-term memory too. Psychologists have noted that our brains often operate with so-called mnemonics, or mental markers, which enable us to group together our ideas and memories on certain topics to make them easy to remember. This is the neurological equivalent, as it were, of creating files of ideas inside an old-fashioned filing cabinet, with colorful, easy-to-see (and remember) labels on the topic. Sometimes this processing of clustering is conscious. More often it is not, as the psychologist Daniel Kahneman has noted.8 Either way clustering ideas into bundles enables us to create order and arrange our thoughts. "You can't think or make decisions, let alone create new ideas . . . without using a range of mental models to simplify things," argue Luc de Brabandere and Alan Iny, two management consultants. "Nobody can deal with the many complicated aspects of real life without first placing things in such boxes."9

This need to classify the world, however, does not just apply to our internal mental processes. Social interaction requires shared classification systems too. This, after all, is what a language is at its core: namely a commonly held agreement between people about what verbal sounds will represent which buckets of ideas. However, societies or social groups have cultural norms too, which shape how people use space, interact with each other, behave, and think. A crucial part of those shared social norms—if not the central element of a "culture"—is a commonly held set of ideas about how to classify the world, and impose a sense of order. Just as our brains need to classify the world to enable us to think, societies need to have a shared taxonomy to function. Back in the seventeenth century, the French philosopher René Descartes observed "I think, therefore I am" (or, to cite what he actually wrote in Latin and French respectively, "cogito ergo sum," or "je pense, donc je suis").10 But it is equally true to say "I classify, therefore I think and am a social being."

But while the act of classification is universal, the way we do it is not: different societies use a wide range of classification systems to organize the world. These vary even when dealing with issues that seem to be universal, such as natural phenomena. In theory, the way humans experience colors should be consistent. We all live in the same universe, with the same spectrum of light, and most of us have similar eyeballs (except for individuals prone to color blindness). But in practice, human societies do not classify colors in the same way. For decades Brent Berlin, an anthropologist, worked with Paul Kay, a linguist, to study how languages around the world described the color spectrum.11 They found at least seven different patterns: some groups in Africa seemed to divide the world into merely three color buckets (roughly, red, black, and white), but some Western cultures used five times as many categories. That finding prompted Caroline Eastman and Robin Carter, two cognitive anthropologists (or people who work in a subset of the discipline analyzing culture and the mind), to conclude that while the color spectrum may be a universal, the way we classify it is not. "Colors can be represented as a grid showing a variation of wavelengths (hues) and brightness," Eastman and Carter wrote. "Each color term represents a region on this grid containing a focal point which is generally agreed to be described by that color term. [But] although there is general agreement on the foci both across cultures and within cultures, there is much less agreement on the boundaries."12

The way that other parts of the natural world are classified varies as well. Birds are found almost everywhere around the world. But some cultures consider birds to be an animal, and do not differentiate between birds; others make precise distinctions. The English word "seagull," for example, is not a category that translates easily into other languages. Similarly, different animal categories can have different associations in different places. Jared Diamond, for example, has looked at how different cultures around the world define their fauna and flora. (Diamond sometimes defines himself as an "environmental anthropologist," which is a another subset of the discipline.) He points out that while the concept of a "horse" is associated with meat in France, and a "cat" viewed that way in China, those categories of animals are not classified as "edible" in a place such as America.13

The taxonomy of social relationships varies even more. Sexual reproduction is universal. However, anthropologists and linguists have discovered at least six different systems for "mapping" kin in different societies around world (in cultural anthropology courses at universities these are known as the "Sudanese," "Hawaiian," "Eskimo," "Iroquois," "Omaha," and "Crow" systems). There is even greater variation in how societies organize their space, define jobs, imagine the cosmos, organize economic activities, or track time. In some cultures, "cooking" is classified as a uniquely female job, performed by women inside the domestic sphere. But in suburban America, when cooking entails a barbecue and meat, it is often classified as a "male" pursuit. Similarly, in Jewish culture, Saturday is classified as a holy day; however, in Muslim culture it is Friday, while in Christian cultures it is Sunday. In many non-Western societies—such as tribes in the Amazon—there is no sense of a seven-day week at all, far less a weekend. So too with dance. Numerous societies have rituals for dancing. However, in some societies dancing is classified as a religious activity. In others it is considered profane, or the very opposite of sacred. In some places, men do not dance with women, but in other cultures the whole point of dancing is that men and women should dance together. The only element that is absolutely common to all these diverse situations is that wherever and however people dance, eat, cook, arrange their space or family lives, they tend to assume that their own particular way of behaving is "natural," "normal," or "inevitable"—and they usually consider that the way that other people dance (and classify the world) is not. This variety illustrates a simple, but crucially important, point: the patterns that we use to organize our lives are often a function of nurture, not nature. That makes them fascinating to analyze. And one person who had a particularly interesting perspective on them was the man who stood watching the dancers—and nondancers—in the Béarn hall, namely Pierre Bourdieu, one of the fathers of modern anthropology.

BOURDIEU NEVER SET OUT to be an anthropologist. He spent the early years of his life assuming that the best way to make sense of the world—if not the only way—was to study philosophy. It seemed a natural assumption, given that he came of age in postwar France, at a time when philosophers such as Jean-Paul Sartre commanded extraordinary popular prestige. "One became a philosopher [then] because one had been consecrated and one consecrated oneself by securing the prestigious identity of a 'philosopher,' Bourdieu explained.14 And Bourdieu was hungry for an identity. He was born in 1930 in Denguin, a tiny hamlet close to Béarn, and his father was a sharecropper-turned-postman who never completed his education. At the age of eleven Bourdieu won a scholarship to attend a boarding school in Pau, a city down in the valley. But it was a scarring experience. As a rural peasant in a sea of wealthier, urban children from Pau, Bourdieu felt inferior. "I think that Flaubert was not entirely wrong in thinking that 'someone who has known boarding school has learned, by the age of twelve, almost everything about life,'?"15 he observed. "I lived my life [at boarding school] in a state of stubborn fury . . . caught between two worlds."

In an effort to fit in, he excelled at his lessons and played rugby with ferocious passion; the sport was wildly popular in South West France. But French society was a stratified, class-ridden place, where people were classified into groups though numerous subtle signals, embedded in language, demeanor, culture, and posture. Bourdieu felt an outsider and he constantly rebelled against the ferocious discipline. "The old seventeenth century [school] building, vast and rebarbative, with its immense corridors, the walls white above and dark green below, or the monumental stone staircases . . . left no secret corner for our own solitude, no refuge, no respite,"16 he recalled. "The adult man who writes this does not know how to do justice to the child who lived through these experiences, his times of despair and rage, his longing for vengeance."

At seventeen, Bourdieu escaped by winning a scholarship to the elite Ecole Normale Supérieure in Paris to study philosophy. After graduating with a high mark, he embarked on a postgraduate research program to explore the epistemology (or knowledge system) of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, another revered early-twentieth-century French intellectual giant, who worked as a phenomenological philosopher. But then his life

took an unexpected turn. In 1955, at the age of twenty-five, Bourdieu was called up to perform military service. Usually, elite students just served as officers in pleasant rural locations. But when Bourdieu was summoned, a bloody civil war had started to loom to the south. Although France had ruled Algeria for over a hundred years, Algerian rebels were demanding independence. Bourdieu told his military superiors that he strongly opposed the Algerian War on principle, since (like many young French intellectuals), he loathed colonialism. The army punished him by assigning him to the front line. "I first landed in the Army Psychological Service in Versailles, following a very privileged route reserved for students of the Ecole Normale," he explained. "But heated arguments with high-ranking officers who wanted to convert me to [support] "L'Algérie Française" [French-run Algeria] soon earned me a reassignment."17

In the summer of 1955 Bourdieu traveled south across the Mediterranean on a boat, in a military unit "made up of all the illiterates of Mayenne and Normandy and a few recalcitrants."18 On the ship he "tried in vain to indoctrinate my fellow soldiers" to oppose the war. But the soldiers already had a strong set of prejudices about Algeria and deeply held views about how the Algerians should be classified. "Even before setting foot in Algeria, they had acquired and assimilated the whole vocabulary of everyday racism [with] extreme submissiveness towards the military hierarchy," he lamented. Isolated, Bourdieu spent months in a desert town called Orléansville, defending an ammunition dump against guerrilla attacks, before being reassigned to Algiers, the capital.

As the war escalated, Bourdieu doggedly worked on his doctoral project out of a tiny bunk room in a military garrison in Algiers. Academic reflections offered one welcome escape from the horrors of a war that Bourdieu considered unjust. But he steadily became disillusioned with philosophy too. Back in the rarefied, safe, intellectual atmosphere of Paris, Bourdieu had believed—like many young French intellectuals—that the abstract philosophy of thinkers such as Sartre or Merleau-Ponty offered the perfect key to understanding the world. But amid the horror of Algerian War, it seemed ridiculous to think that abstract philosophy alone could explain real life. By late 1955 Algerian rebels were not just mounting attacks on ammunition dumps, but slitting the throats of French military personnel and civilians. The French army was using brutal tactics to fight back. They staged house-to-house raids, arrested thousands of suspected rebels, tortured captives, bombed villages, and resettled tens of thousands of people, out of their mountain villages into sterile, quasi-camps. So Bourdieu changed tack, and decided to write a book about real life in Algeria, instead of the philosopher Merleau-Ponty. "[I wanted] to tell the French people . . . what was really going on in a country of which they knew next to nothing . . . in order to be some use, and perhaps also to stave off the guilty conscience of the helpless witness of an abominable war."19 And to do so, he turned to a discipline that was just starting to become fashionable, due to the writings of French academic Claude Lévi-Strauss: the world of anthropology.

TO SOME PEOPLE, BOURDIEU'S interest in anthropology might have seemed baffling. Anthropology has often been considered a strange discipline: difficult to define and for outsiders to understand. It is simultaneously everywhere in modern intellectual thought, but nowhere. The word comes from the Greek (anthropos literally means "the study of man") and the first recorded example of somebody trying to study human culture in a systematic way probably appears in the writings of the Greek historian Herodotus in 450 BC. (When he wrote about the battles between the Greeks and Persians, Herodotus devoted a considerable amount to an analysis of the cultural differences that he saw, comparing and describing them as distinct social systems and patterns.)20 Then, during the seventeenth and eighteenth century, the concept of anthropology reappeared when men such as David Hume declared a desire to "study the nature of mankind."21 But in the nineteenth century, this endeavor turned into a full-fledged academic discipline. "When anthropology was born, shortly after the middle of the nineteenth century, two factors, above all others, determined its form," as Ernest Gellner, an anthropologist, notes. "Darwinism and colonialism."22 The nineteenth-century elite in Europe and America felt a need to understand the "alien" peoples that they

were encountering in Africa, Asia, and the Americas (usually because they wanted to control them, tax them, or convert them to Christianity, or all three). Meanwhile, the emergence of Charles Darwin's ideas about evolution was sparking a passionate debate and interest in the question of what it meant to be human. Just as biologists and zoologists were trying to understand how the animal kingdom evolved, historians and social scientists became interested in studying how "primitive" peoples had developed over the centuries into "advanced" societies. One facet of this inquiry revolved around the physical evolution of humans. Another, though, focused on the social and cultural evolution. "The European and North American conquests of extensive regions previously inhabited only by simpler societies inevitably inspired the idea that these populations could be used as surrogate time machines," Gellner notes. "Anthropology was born out of an intense curiosity about the past, about human origins."23

One of the first men who blazed a path on this intellectual road was James Frazer, a nineteenth-century Scottish intellectual. He collected extensive data on myths and legends from around the world, and collated these into a highly influential book, The Golden Bough, which explored how human consciousness and culture had moved from being "primitive" to "civilized." Numerous other anthropologists took a similarly evolutionary approach. But at the turn of the century Franz Boas embarked on a similar project with the Native Americans. Boas had started his academic career as a botanist, but during a trip to the Arctic he became fascinated by how the Eskimos classified snow, and dove into cultural anthropology instead. He then switched his attention to the Native Americans, gathering artifacts and material about their customs and "primitive" minds, which he plotted into groups. But then he floated a striking idea: maybe it was wrong to assume that humans always evolved in a social sense along a single path. Perhaps culture should be studied on its own terms.

As the nineteenth century turned into the twentieth, this antievolutionary idea spread: anthropologists gradually moved away from their earlier assumptions that non-Western cultures were always inferior, or less developed than the cultures of Europe or America. They could not always be squeezed into patronizing historical models.

Bronislaw Malinowski exemplified this shift. An ethnic Pole who was born in the former Austro-Hungarian empire, he studied at the London School of Economics, he started his academic career doing old-fashioned anthropology, studying the indigenous people of Australia. Then, when World War I broke out, he realized he could be interned in Australia as an enemy national. To avoid that, he headed for the Trobriand Islands, near Papua New Guinea, and ended up staying there far longer than expected due to the war. As a result, instead of just swooping in and out, gathering artifacts, which would later be analyzed from the comfort of a faraway library, he ended up pitching his tent among the Trobriand villagers and living there for many months. That enabled him to watch the villagers for an extended period, as a fly on the wall, leaving him convinced that it was quite wrong to label the Trobriand Islanders as "primitive." On the contrary, Trobriand culture had a certain beauty and rhythm of its own that needed to be understood in its own terms. This was epitomized by a ritual known as the Kula, which involved the elaborate exchange of shells between different islands. To a casual observer, this practice might have seemed quaint, bizarre, and pointless, particularly since the shells did not appear to have any immediate value or use. However, Malinowski pointed out that the Kula was not just a sophisticated and elaborate system, but it had a crucial social function, since the exchange of shells not only defined who was in the social group, but also created ties of obligation and trust linking the archipelago.

In 1922 Malinowksi published a book, Argonauts of the Western Pacific, that described his findings.24 It changed the discipline. Around the world, young anthropologists started to conduct what they called "participant observation" and "ethnography," or the process of watching the people they studied and then writing thick descriptions. British anthropologists such as Evans Pritchard went to Sudan, and John

Radcliffe-Brown went to the Andaman Islands, Margaret Mead, an American anthropologist, went to Polynesia, and Ruth Benedict went to Australia and then studied Japan. Clifford Geertz, another American luminary, went to Bali, and Maurice Bloch left France for Madagascar. And as this new breed of anthropologists conducted their research, the discipline of anthropology effectively split into two. One stream, known as “cultural anthropology” in America (or “social anthropology” in Europe) looked at culture and society; the second stream, called “physical anthropology,” studied human evolution and biology. Initially, these endeavors had been entwined. But when anthropologists started looking at social systems in the present, the study of human evolution began to seem less connected to modern culture, and some anthropologists started to find more affinity with other disciplines, such as linguistics.

Claude Lévi-Strauss, a French anthropologist, is a case in point. He started his career as a linguist and philosopher, in the classic French intellectual style. But Lévi-Strauss (like Bourdieu) eventually tired of abstract musing. “Since I was a child, I have been bothered by, let’s call it the irrational, and have been trying to find an order behind what is given to us as a disorder,” he later observed. “It so happened that I became an anthropologist . . . not because I was interested in anthropology, but because I was trying to get out of philosophy.”25 In the late 1940s he became fascinated with myth and legend. He believed that if you analyzed myths around the world, you could understand how human cognition worked. His theory, called “structuralism,” posited that the human brain has a tendency to organize information in patterns, marked by binary oppositions (not dissimilar to how computers code data), and these patterns are expressed and reinforced in cultural practices, such as myths or religious rituals. It was a theoretical construct that did not draw directly on much participant observation of the type that Malinowski had pioneered. However, Lévi-Strauss supported his argument with extensive data drawn from communities around the world, and when he published his ideas in the 1950s in books such as The Elementary Structures of Kinship, Tristes Tropiques, and The Savage Mind,26 the books earned widespread plaudits. They also provoked a new wave of interest in the then little-known discipline of anthropology among European intellectuals. Such as the ambitious would-be philosopher Pierre Bourdieu.

BY 1957, A FULL-BLOWN war had erupted in Algeria and Bourdieu’s military service had come to an end. But he remained haunted by a desire to “explain” the world around him, and to understand the anthropos of Algeria. So after being discharged from the army, he applied for a teaching post at the University of Algiers, and set out on an intellectual crusade. “The simple desire to observe and witness led me to invest myself . . . in frenzied work,” he explained.27 His methods were the opposite of philosophy or any other armchair disciplines such as economics. He journeyed in buses to the most remote corners of Algeria, hitched rides on French military cavalcades, or traveled furtively with Algerian friends. He sat down among the local people, quietly sitting, observing, asking questions, and living among them.28 It was a crazily dangerous endeavor. The countryside was teaming with rebels and French soldiers. In remote villages, elderly Algerians sometimes pulled him aside and recounted “in places where no one would hear us, of the torture the French army had inflicted on them.”29 French officers would describe how extremist Algerians were cutting the throats of French children and women, or planting roadside bombs. In high mountains, Bourdieu would see guns hidden under the men’s flowing white robes, or djellaba, and “along the whole shoreline, the mountains were in flames,” and the “doors of all the cafés were protected with wire mesh to prevent grenade attacks.”30 But Bourdieu pressed on. “[My] disregard for danger owed nothing to any sort of heroism but, rather, was rooted in extreme sadness and anxiety.”31 Like Malinowksi, Bourdieu was determined to taste and see real life, at the grass roots. He wanted to understand the mental map that Algerians used to order their world.

It was up in the high mountains of Algeria that Bourdieu first turned this fascination into a full-blown theory. During his research, he spent time with a group of Berber tribesmen, known as the Kabyle, and discovered that they had strong ideas about the best way to build a house. Their dwellings were always rectangular, the front door facing west, with a giant weaving loom placed opposite this door. Inside the house, the Kabyle

always separated the space in two, divided by a low internal wall. Half of the house—which was typically raised a bit higher, and larger and lighter—housed a weaving loom, and was used to entertain guests and stage formal meals. Men slept there. However, the second half of the house was smaller, darker, and lower. That was where animals lived, children and women slept, and the Kabyle stored everyday goods, along with anything that was wet, green, or damp.

When Bourdieu asked the Kabyle villagers why they arranged their houses in this pattern, they found his question bizarre. To them, it seemed normal to classify space, objects, and people in this way. They had grown up dividing their homes like this and to do anything else felt strange. If somebody had suggested that the Kabyle should store wet, green, or damp items in the place where men slept they would have laughed or winced, just as an American suburban family might recoil if you suggested storing shampoo in the car, or putting the fridge under the bed. To the Kabyle, this pattern was simply how the world worked.

But Bourdieu, as an outsider, could see that the pattern was not inevitable. He could also see that the way the Kabyle arranged their house echoed how they organized other aspects of their life. In Kayble culture, men were considered separate (and superior) to women, and public space was distinct from the private sphere. Similarly, their religion distinguished between "damp" and "fertile" activities, and those that were "dry." The spatial map of a Kabyle house thus reflected a social and mental map too, and this created a subtle, mutually reinforcing interplay of space, mind, and body. The Kabyle built their houses that way because of their cultural norms about how women, say, should interact with men, and these norms were reinforced whenever they stepped into their houses, to a point where the patterns seemed entirely natural.

The Kabyle are not unique. This interplay is found in all human societies. Take New York's City Hall. As Bloomberg discovered when he became mayor, the layout of the government offices reflected local ideas about how people should work. The fact that firefighters sat in dedicated departments reflected the idea that firefighters were a specialist team, separate from others. But precisely because firefighters sat apart from teachers, say, it seemed natural they should be separate. Architecture is driven by our mental vision of the world. But the way we design offices, say, ingrains our classification systems as well. We all tend to be creatures of our own environment, in a physical, social, and mental sense, although we usually do not notice this at all. Habits matter.

IN 1961, PIERRE BOURDIEU left Algeria. By then, the French military had used such brutal tactics against the rebels this had sparked a widespread backlash. (Indeed, the aggressive policies were so counterproductive that when America went into Iraq fifty years later, the Pentagon staged screenings of the film The Battle of Algiers to its officers as a cautionary tale of what not to do in the Middle East.) Eventually, the backlash became so intense that the French government decided to withdraw. Angry local French settlers took revenge against some of the French intellectuals who had opposed the war, and Bourdieu fled for his life.

He returned to Paris to a comfortable academic post, working with Raymond Aron, a prominent sociologist. The next natural career step for Bourdieu would have been to build on his reputation as an expert in Algeria, as an anthropologist. After all, anthropologists were expected to study exotic, non-Western cultures, like the Kabyle Berber. But once again, Bourdieu refused to conform. Back in 1959, while he was based in Algiers, he had visited his family in the French Pyrenees and become fascinated by what he could see unfolding there. When Bourdieu looked at his old hometown, he could see that the French villagers had just as many rules, patterns, and social maps as the Kabyle. To Frenchmen, their rules seemed natural, if not obvious. But to outsiders they did not. So Bourdieu concocted a bold plan. He asked a young Algerian sociology student, Abdelmalek Sayad, to travel with him out to the Pyrenees. Bourdieu had worked with Sayad to conduct his research in Algeria and they made a good team: Sayad, as a local insider, understood how Algerian culture

worked; but Bourdieu, the French outsider, could spot patterns in Algerian culture that Sayad did not see. Bourdieu reckoned that this same principle could work in reverse: Abdelmalek would be an outsider in France, so he would spot oddities that French people ignored.

This was not anthropology in the way that Victorians like James Frazer had first imagined the craft. For one thing, Bourdieu was turning the colonial power structures upside down, treating French villagers on the same level as the Kabyle. But Bourdieu was convinced that the best way to understand any society was to take an inside-outsider view, and to flip perspective. So Sayad and Bourdieu repeated exactly what they had done in Algeria: they tramped around the hills of South West France, measuring things, watching everyday life, talking to people. Sometimes Bourdieu took his father with him, to help him become a real insider in local French culture. On other occasions, Bourdieu deliberately positioned himself as an outsider from his subjects. “The most visible sign of the conversion of the gaze [from insider to observer] was the intensive use I then made of photographs, maps, ground plans and statistics,” he later explained.32 But as he kept flipping his perspective he gained new insights into the anthropos of France. It was unexpectedly liberating in a personal sense too. Twenty years earlier, Bourdieu had been furious over the way he felt excluded from the snobbish culture of elite France. Now he realized that his childhood anger had produced an unexpected benefit, teaching him to notice cultural patterns. Instead of just wanting to destroy the hierarchy, he now wanted to understand it.

IN SUBSEQUENT YEARS, BOURDIEU broadened his gaze into the Western world way beyond his hometown. He analyzed the French elite, studying how their seemingly mundane choices in relation to food, art, furnishings, and so on helped to define modern French society—and stratify it into different social groups. In one of his most famous books, Distinction, he analyzed how a mundane action, such as deciding to order bouillabaisse in a restaurant (or not) creates social labels and markers that sort people into different groups. The tiny decisions that people constantly make in their lives are never irrelevant or meaningless. Small signals constantly express and reinforce power relations. Our ideas about what is pretty, ugly, tacky, trendy, or cool classify people (and things) into particular mental and social buckets.

Then Bourdieu turned his lens to the world of American arts funding, the nature of photography, the operations of the modern media, and behavior of political groups. He peered into the French education system and different academic tribes that dominated the universities in Paris. He also looked at the poorest parts of French society, seeking to make sense of how the “dispossessed” people lived in the infamous banlieue—suburbs—of Paris. Wherever he went, he obsessively watched, listened, and tried to flip his analytical lens back and forth from insider to outsider, seeking to uncover patterns that people inside a society could not always see, blending the participant observer principles of Malinowski with the vision of Lévi-Strauss. “I spent hours listening to conversations, in cafés, on pétanque, or football pitches, in post offices but also at society receptions or cocktail parties or concerts,” he recounted. “I have been able to participate in universes of thought, past or present, very distant from my own . . . the aristocracy or bankers, dancers at the Paris Opera or actors at the Théâtre-Française, auctioneers or notaries, and work myself into [their world].33

This research eventually produced some fifty-seven books, and gave birth to numerous theories. It is worth spelling out five of his most important ideas (out of a long list of his concepts), since these five points provide an intellectual framework for this book.

• First, Bourdieu believed that human society creates certain patterns of thought and classification systems, which people absorb and use to arrange space, people, and ideas. Bourdieu liked to call the physical and social environment that people live in the “habitus,” and he believed that the patterns in this habitus both reflect the mental maps or classification systems inside our heads and reinforce them.

• Second, Bourdieu also believed that these patterns help to reproduce the status of the elite. Since this elite has an interest in preserving the status quo, it also has every incentive to reinforce cultural maps, rules, and taxonomies. Or to put it another way, an elite stays in power over time not just by controlling resources, or what Bourdieu described as “economic capital” (money), but also by amassing “cultural capital” (symbols associated with power). When they amass this cultural capital, this helps to make the status of the elite seem natural and inevitable. The wealthy French pupils at Bourdieu’s boarding school, for example, exuded a “natural” sense of authority and power by wrapping themselves in dozens of tiny, subtle cultural signals, which nonelite people such as Bourdieu lacked.

• Third, Bourdieu did not believe that the elite—or anyone else—created these cultural and mental maps deliberately. Instead, they arose as much from semiconscious instinct as conscious design, operating at the “borders of conscious and unconscious thought.” The habitus does not just reflect our social patterns, but it ingrains them too, making these seem natural and inevitable. The elite and nonelite are both creatures of their cultural environment.

• Fourth, Bourdieu believed that what really matters in a society’s mental map is not simply what is publicly and overtly stated, but what is not discussed. Social silences matter. The system ends up being propped up because it seems natural to leave certain topics ignored, since these issues have become labeled as dull, taboo, obvious, or impolite. In any society, Bourdieu argued, there are ideas that are freely debated, and there can be differences of views about this (or a clash between the orthodoxy and heterodoxy). But outside that space of acceptable debate (or the “doxa”) there are many issues that are never discussed at all, not because of any clearly articulated plot, but because ignoring those issues seems normal. Or as Bourdieu said: “The most powerful forms of ideological effect are those which need no words, but merely a complicitous silence.”34 The non-dancers in a village hall matter.

• But a fifth key point that is implicit in Bourdieu’s work is that people do not always have to be trapped in the mental maps that they inherit. We are not robots, blindly programmed to behave in certain ways. We can also have some choice about the patterns we use. How much choice humans have to reshape their cultural norms was—and is—an issue of hot dispute. When Bourdieu was first embarking on his academic career, Sartre, the French philosopher, declared that humans did have free will, and could develop their thoughts as they chose. Lévi-Strauss took another view: he thought that humans were doomed to be creatures of their environment, since they could not think out of their inherited cultural patterns.

Bourdieu, however, rejected both of these ideas; or, more accurately, he steered a middle ground between these two extremes. He did not think that people are robots, programmed to obey cultural rules automatically. Indeed, he did not like the word “rules” at all, preferring to talk about cultural “habits.” But he also believed these habits and the habitus shaped how people behave and think. Social maps are powerful. But they are not all-powerful. We are creatures of our physical and social environment. However, we need not be blind creatures. Occasionally, individuals can imagine a different way of organizing our world, particularly if they—like Bourdieu—have become an insider-outsider by jumping across boundaries.

BY THE TIME BOURDIEU died in 2002, his work had made him famous in France. So much so that his death was marked by the main French paper, Le Monde, with a huge headline on its front page declaring “Pierre Bourdieu est mort!” Outside France, he was not as well known by the public. But his life had become a very powerful symbol of how the study of anthropos had developed across the West. Anthropology was no longer just a study of the “other,” or exotic, alien, non-Western cultures. It had also become a study of the “self,” or the place where the Western anthropologists who (still dominated) academic debate lived. The ideas advanced by Bourdieu had blended with the work done by numerous other anthropologists to create a new approach.

Kate Fox, a British anthropologist, is one such descendant. Her father, Robin Fox, was an anthropologist at London University, then Rutgers in America, and he pursued a career that seemed typical of anthropology at the time. He studied the Cochiti Indians of New Mexico, taking his family with him to live there as he strode around dusty villages. “Unlike most infants, who spend their early days lying in a pram or cot . . . I was strapped to a Cochiti Indian cradle-board,” Kate Fox recalls.35 This boundary-hopping created such an impression on her that she eventually chose to become an anthropologist herself. (A notable trait of the discipline is that many of the people who choose to study anthropology have been exposed to cultural dislocations at some point in their childhood or young adult lives; myself included.) But when Kate did her own research she decided that she did not want to study “exotic” peoples, but her own English society instead. “The human species is addicted to rule making. Every society has food taboos, rules about gift-giving, rules about hairstyles, rules about dancing, greetings, hospitality, joking, weaning, etc.,” she wrote in Watching the English, which analyzes English rituals, ranging from horse racing rituals to conversations about the weather. “I don’t see why anthropologists feel they have to travel to remote corners of the world and get dysentery in order to study strange tribal cultures with bizarre beliefs and mysterious customs. The weirdest, most puzzling tribe of all is right here on our own doorstep.”36

Numerous other anthropologists have followed a similar path, studying not just the Western world but some of the most modern and complex parts of it. In the late twentieth century Karen Ho (at the University of Minnesota) spent several years studying the habitus of Wall Street banks, using the same intellectual framework that Bourdieu developed among the Kabyle to understand the mind-set of bankers.37 Caitlin Zaloom, another American anthropologist, has studied financial traders in Chicago and London.38 Alexandra Ouroussoff, a British anthropologist, has studied credit rating agencies.39 Douglas Holmes (at Binghamton University) has analyzed central banks and explored how institutions such as the European Central Bank and Bank of England use words and silences to shape markets.40 Annelise Riles (from Cornell Law School) has explored how international lawyers treat finance.41 Geraldine Bell (an anthropologist employed by Intel) has analyzed computing culture. Danah Boyd, a self-styled “digital anthropologist” employed by Yahoo, has explored how social media has shaped American teenagers.42 These are just a tiny sample of the work that thousands of anthropologists have done, and are still doing, in companies, government departments, urban communities, rural villages, and so on. However, wherever anthropologists work, the research tends to share particular traits: a focus on watching real life, usually through participant observation; a desire to connect all parts of society, rather than just concentrate on one tiny corner; a commitment to analyzing the gap between rhetoric and reality, or the social silences that mark our lives; and, above all else, a passion for anthropos, or understanding the spoken and unspoken cultural patterns that shape human existence, or the intellectual endeavor that drove Bourdieu.

However, by the time that the brilliant Frenchman died, his heritage was marked by a profound irony: though he had been highly influential for anthropology in the last couple of decades of his career, Bourdieu stopped calling himself an “anthropologist,” and started describing himself as a “sociologist” instead. He did that partly because he was offered a juicy job as “Professor of Sociology” in a Paris university. Another factor, however, was that as the twentieth century wore on the disciplines of anthropology and sociology increasingly blended into one. As anthropologists started to study complex Western societies and sociologists conducted more on-the-ground research, it became harder to draw distinctions between the academic fields. In any case, Bourdieu believed that it was ridiculous to fret too much about academic boundaries or labels. He did not want to put any discipline into a specialist box, and he hated the way that universities tended to classify academics into different, competing tribes. To Bourdieu, “anthropology” was not really an academic label or self-contained discipline, but an attitude toward life. It was an intellectual prism, or mode of inquiry, that anyone could use to get a richer understanding of the world, in combination with other fields such as economics, sociology, among others. To be an anthropologist you did not need to sit inside a university, or have a doctorate. Instead, you needed to be humbly curious, ready to question,

criticize, explore, and challenge ideas; to look at the world with fresh eyes and think about the classification systems and cultural patterns that we take for granted. “Anthropology demands the open-mindedness with which one must look and listen, record in astonishment and wonder that which one would not have been able to guess,” as Margaret Mead, the former doyenne of the American anthropology world, once observed.43

That carries wide lessons, not least because it means that anthropology can be applied to many fields. In my case, for example, I started my career doing a PhD in anthropology in a classic manner. I traveled to Soviet Tajikistan, and spent many months in a remote mountainous village engaged in participant observation of the type pioneered by Malinowksi. I wore Tajik clothes, lived with families, helped them in their daily chores, and spent hours observing the villagers, studying how this community used marriage rituals to express ethnic identity. (Essentially I concluded that the villagers maintained their Muslim identity in a supposedly atheist communist system by juggling these marriage rituals and symbols, subdividing their space and using marriage ties to define their social group.) However, like Bourdieu, I later became frustrated with what I saw of the world of academic anthropology. Although the discipline promotes the idea of taking an interconnected perspective on the world, university departments of anthropology can be surprisingly introverted and detached from the wider world. (That is partly because the discipline tends to attract people who are better at listening and observing than thrusting themselves into the limelight. Its adherents also tend to be antiestablishment, and wary of dealing with the institutions of power, perhaps because they analyze them so extensively.) I on the other hand was eager to interact with the world in a more dynamic manner. So when an opportunity arose to move into journalism, I grabbed it; it seemed a place I could use some of my training in observation and analysis. Writing stories felt like the anthropological equivalent of being on a speed date.

But once you have conducted anthropology research, as I did, you never lose that perspective. Studying anthropology tends to change the way you look at the world. It leaves a distinctive chip in your brain, or lens over your eye. Your mind-set becomes instinctive: wherever you go or work, you start asking questions about how different elements of a society interact, looking at the gap between rhetoric and reality, noting the concealed functions of rituals and symbols, and hunting out social silences. Anyone who has been immersed in anthropology is doomed to be an insider-outsider for the rest of their life; they can never take anything entirely at face value, but are compelled to constantly ask: why? Anthropology, in other words, makes you permanently curious, cynical, and relativist. Adding that perspective to other fields of inquiry enhances your analysis, just as salt adds flavor to food.

I certainly would not pretend that studying anthropology is the only way to get this insider-outsider perspective, or to question the cultural patterns around us. We all know some individuals who have an innate ability to question cultural rules, pierce social silences, see the story behind the story, and analyze social patterns but have never studied anthropology. But we also know many people who do not question the world; in fact, most people never analyze or question the cultural patterns—or habits—that guide them. Most of us are unthinking creatures of our environment, in the sense that we rarely challenge the ideas we inherit. But the key point is this: with or without a formal training in anthropology, we all do need to think about the cultural patterns and classification systems that we use. If we do, we can master our silos. If we do not, they will master us.

Moreover, when people are mastered by rigid silos this can cause debilitating problems. As I shall now explain in the following chapters, starting with the story of Sony—and its peculiar “octopus pots.”

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