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Relevance of Pierre Bourdieu's theory to Contemporary Society

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Abstract

This paper aims to review a comprehensive and lucid introduction to Bourdieu's work. The purpose is to make his work accessible for those tackling him for the first time. An attempt has also been made to reconstruct Bourdieu's actual development and to try and understand underlying dynamics, to enumerate the new tools for thinking which can be acquired from Bourdieu's work, to analyse the relevance of Pierre Bourdieu's theory to contemporary society and to assess the strength and weakness of Bourdieu's theory.

INTRODUCTION

Pierre Bourdieu (1930-2002) was one of the most prolific and influential social theorists of the second half of the twentieth century. Not only was his output astonishing, but his work has been cited continuously and approvingly by an array of scholars from many disciplines. His initial work intervened in sociology, but as his scholarship broadened, he sought to influence philosophy, anthropology, cultural criticism, psychology, linguistics, economics, and finally, for the last two decades of his life, the political arena itself. He is well known for introducing a number of important sociological concepts that have since gained wide currency.

Pierre Bourdieu's work on the sociology of culture and language, on practical reason, on education, on citizenship and the cultures of poverty, and on a range of other topics is now coming to be seen as one of the 20th century's most important contributions to our thinking about the world. Bourdieu has left his mark on most of the "big" theoretical issues in the world of contemporary theory - gender, subjectivity, the body, culture, citizenship, and globalisation - and his terms are now commonplace: "social capital", "cultural capital", "field", and "habitus". Bourdieu examines how people conduct their lives in relation to one another and to major social institutions.

He argues that culture and education aren't simply minor influences, but as important as economics in determining differences between groups of people. Unlike the other grand systematisers Marx and Foucault, Bourdieu has tested these arguments in detailed fieldwork. His range is eclectic, his vision is vast, and his writing is often dense and challenging.

Pierre Bourdieu's theoretical perspectives are distinctly academic and complex in style when compared to the other theorists. As a result of this complex style he has been difficult to understand. Bourdieu himself in *Social Space and Symbolic Power* expresses his frustration that his "system of relations will go unnoticed by the reader, despite the use of diagrams"¹.

Richard Jenkins provides a comforting view of Bourdieu's writing style in his 1992 work, *Pierre Bourdieu*. He states simply "He does not have to write in this fashion to say what he wants to say"². Prior to this he labels the language as obscure and daunting for even professional social scientists³.

Bourdieu has produced what one critic calls the most comprehensive and elegant system since Talcott Parsons⁴.

In the limited space of this paper I cannot do full justice to the body of Bourdieu's theoretical and empirical work. However, I tend to emphasize the meaning of the central concepts involved in Bourdieu's thought and their relevance in interpretation of modern social issues.

¹ 1989; p.16

² Jenkins, 1992; p.1

³ *ibid*

⁴ DiMaggio, 1979 ; vide also Sulkunen, 1982 ; Inglis, 1979 ; Thomson, 1984

Concepts Central to Bourdieu's Thought

Bourdieu was arguably the most important and influential social theorist of the last quarter of the 20th century. If his remarkable oeuvre proves enduringly influential, as I believe it will, this will reflect not only the power and sophistication of his theoretical synthesis, but also the fact that the “thinking tools” comprising that synthesis were developed not in abstraction from but in continuous engagement with empirical research, and because those tools – designed for and developed in the context of collective sociological work – have been appropriated, indeed were designed to be appropriated, by other researchers.

It is useful to begin by elucidating some major concepts in Bourdieu's thought. The key terms in Bourdieu's sociological thought are **social field**, **capital**, and **habitus**. **HABITUS** Habitus is of critical importance to his theory of social practice. It is a term which surfaces early in his body of work (1967: 344) and which consistently reappears throughout with little, if any, variation of meaning. Habitus is a “mental or cognitive structure” which can explain an individual’s actions and perceptions of their world.

According to "International Encyclopedia of Social Sciences"⁵ : *Habitus is a term used by the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1930–2002) to describe a social property of individuals that orients human behaviour without strictly determining it.* While habitus encompasses a sense of practical expertise, it is not a conscious expertise; rather, it may be seen as common sense. It is constituted of dispositions that are inculcated, structured, durable, generative, and transposable. Thus, habitus is purposeful without being questionable; it is transmitted but not actively taught.

According to "Encyclopedia of social theory Vol 1"⁶ : *Habitus, in its original Latin meaning, refers to the habitual or typical state or condition of the body.* What Bourdieu encapsulates in habitus are those aspects of human beings that are neither fully conscious nor unconscious, neither collective nor individual (or, perhaps, both simultaneously). Definitively located in embodied individuals, these are inculcated during primary and secondary socialisation, although Bourdieu goes out of his way to avoid the word. In early childhood, the foundations of sociality, from language to

⁵ William A. Darity Jr.(ed), International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences, Vol.3, Page 404- 406, McMillan, (2nd ed, 2008)

⁶ George Ritzer (ed), Encyclopedia of social theory Vol 1, Page 353-354,Sage Publication, (2005)

morality, are learned, only to be forgotten as the condition of their durability and power. Unreflexively, they are constituted in and through habituation and habit formation. Bourdieu used the term habitus or hexis for the set of acquired characteristics that has become a second nature, thus designating dispositions that are beyond the reach of conscious decisions⁷.

In *Le Déracinement* (1964) Bourdieu used the notion in a more general manner, not only for bodily postures, but as a 'permanent and general disposition with regard to the world and the others.'⁸

Habitus is defined by Bourdieu as "an acquired system of generative schemes objectively adjusted to the particular conditions in which it is constituted"⁹. This is central to his vision of human beings as internally in tune, albeit perhaps non reflexively, with the external material conditions of their existence. Habitus comprises both classificatory schema and practical dispositions, both generative of action and each inextricably implicated in the other. 'Habitus' refers to the dispositions that human agents acquire, through life-long processes of learning and socialisation, that give them the competence to respond in certain ways to given social situations.

While these dispositions are realised in social practice they are not readily reducible to a set of rules governing social behaviour. They are rather the agent's 'feel' for how to proceed in the situation. As such they have a flexibility that at once serves to explain the stability of the social order and its transformation.

If 'habitus' therefore allows Bourdieu to theorise the agent, 'field' theorises the objectivity of the social situation. Society is understood as a structured hierarchy of relatively autonomous fields (such as the fields of politics, economics literature, and education). A field may be characterized in terms of the political and cultural relationships. Habitus is also important to the concept of cultural capital, as much of cultural capital can be derived from an individual's habitus. It is often defined as being dispositions that are inculcated in the family but manifest themselves in different ways in each individual.¹⁰ It is formed not only by the habitus of the family¹¹ but also by the

⁷ Bourdieu 1962: 115

⁸ Bourdieu and Sayad 1964: 102

⁹ 1977:95

¹⁰ Harker, 1990:10; Webb, 2002:37; Gorder, 1980:226

objective chances of the class to which the individual belongs¹², in their daily interactions¹³ and it changes as the individual's position within a field changes¹⁴.

CAPITAL

Bourdieu begins his analysis of capital with Marx by the following definition¹⁵: "Capital is accumulated labour (in its materialized form or its 'incorporated', embodied form) which, when appropriated on a private, exclusive, basis by agents or groups of agents, enables them to appropriate social energy in the form of reified or living labour." Although Bourdieu borrowed some ideas about labour and capital from Marx, his explanations are different at some points. For Bourdieu, capital is a source, form of wealth, which produces power. On the other hand, for Marx, capital is not only wealth, but also, a complex relation of production. This mode of production, capitalism, intensifies and expands the process of exploitation. Bourdieu uses capital not only in economic sense but also he gives it some different meanings. For him, there are different forms of capital such as cultural, symbolic and social. In 'The Forms of Capital'¹⁶, Bourdieu distinguishes between four types of capital:

- **Economic capital:** command over economic resources (cash, assets).
- **Social capital:** resources based on group membership, relationships, networks of influence and support. Bourdieu defines social capital as "the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition."
- **Cultural capital:** forms of knowledge, skills, education, and advantages that a person has, which give them a higher status in society. Parents provide their children with cultural capital by transmitting the attitudes and knowledge needed to succeed in the current educational system.
- **Symbolic capital:** resources available to an individual on the basis of honour, prestige or recognition.

¹¹ Harker et al., 1990:11

¹² King, 2005:222

¹³ Gorder, 1980:226

¹⁴ Harker, 1990:11

¹⁵ 1986: 241

¹⁶ 1987: 3-4: 1986: 245

Types of Cultural Capital

Cultural Capital has three subtypes¹⁷:

- i. Embodied cultural capital ,
- ii. Objectified cultural capital ,
- iii. Institutionalised cultural capital.

Bourdieu distinguishes between these three types of capital:

- **Embodied cultural capital** consists of both the consciously acquired and the passively "inherited" properties of one's self (with "inheritance") here used not in the genetic sense but in the sense of receipt over time, usually from the family through socialization, of culture and traditions). Cultural capital is not transmissible instantaneously like a gift or bequest; rather, it is acquired over time as it impresses itself upon one's habitus (character and way of thinking), which in turn becomes more attentive to or primed to receive similar influences.
- **Linguistic capital**, defined as the mastery of and relation to language (Bourdieu, 1990:114), can be understood as a form of embodied cultural capital in that it represents a means of communication and self-presentation acquired from one's surrounding culture.

Objectified cultural capital consists of physical objects that are owned, such as scientific instruments or works of art. These cultural goods can be transmitted both for economic profit (as by buying and selling them with regard only to others' willingness to pay) and for the purpose of "symbolically" conveying the cultural capital whose acquisition they facilitate. However, while one can possess objectified cultural capital by owning a painting, one can "consume" the painting (understand its cultural meaning) only if one has the proper foundation of conceptually and/or historically prior cultural capital, whose transmission does not accompany the sale of the painting (except coincidentally and through independent causation, such as when a vendor or broker chooses to explain the painting's significance to the prospective buyer).

• **Institutionalized cultural capital** consists of institutional recognition, most often in the form of academic credentials or qualifications, of the cultural capital held by an

¹⁷ Bourdieu, 1986:47

individual. This concept plays its most prominent role in the labour market, in which it allows a wide array of cultural capital to be expressed in a single qualitative and quantitative measurement (and compared against others' cultural capital similarly measured). The institutional recognition process thereby eases the conversion of cultural capital to economic capital by serving as a heuristic that sellers can use to describe their capital and buyers can use to describe their needs for that capital.

Moreover, what all Bourdieu's capitals share is that each requires, and is the product of, an investment of an appropriate kind and each can secure a return on that investment. The different types of capital can be acquired, exchanged, and converted into other forms.

Because the structure and distribution of capital also represent the inherent structure of the social world, Bourdieu argues that an understanding of the multiple forms of capital will help elucidate the structure and functioning of the social world. The concept cultural capital is fundamentally linked to the concepts of fields and habitus. These three concepts have been continually developed throughout all of Bourdieu's work.

FIELD

A field can be any structure of social relations¹⁸. It is a site of struggle for positions within that field and is constituted by the conflict created when individuals or groups endeavour to establish what comprises valuable and legitimate capital within that space. Therefore one type of cultural capital can be at the same time both legitimate and not, depending on the field in which it is located. It can be seen therefore, that the legitimation of a particular type of cultural capital is completely arbitrary. The power to arbitrarily determine what constitutes legitimate cultural capital within a specific field is derived from symbolic capital. Bourdieu's field is a theory which places individuals relative to one another objectively. The position of the actors in each field is founded on their ownership of different types of capital, such as social capital and cultural capital. Applying these ideas to the ever relevant idea of taste, Bourdieu's *Distinction* is an eye opener for most as he reveals the logic behind taste (1987).

¹⁸ King, 2005:223

THE THEORY OF PRACTICE

Bourdieu's epistemological writings are concentrated in two closely related works, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (1977) and *The Logic of Practice* (1990), which focus on his anthropology and the theorisation of how humans do what they do and how we are to understand the world they construct in so doing. This foundational framework rests on three key equally important concepts: practice, habitus, and field.

Practice is what humans do (and, for Bourdieu, should not be confused with voluntarist notions of "action"). It is improvisatory rather than rule governed; it is embodied; it takes time and is situated in space; it is strategic, in that it goes somewhere, producing outcomes. Bourdieu's emphasis on practice betrays the influence of Marx's early writings, on one hand, and Goffman, on the other. Epistemologically, it is important to attend to what people actually do because of the gulf between official cultural accounts and everyday realities.

Relevance of Bourdieu's theory to contemporary society

Social phenomena can be understood in terms of the concepts used by Bourdieu. Concepts like habitus, and its various forms, capital and its various kinds and the variety of field are relevant to comprehend social actions, social structures and the happenings including social changes in the contemporary society.

Use of the concept in theory and research

The concept of cultural capital has received widespread attention all around the world, from theorists and researchers alike. It is mostly employed in relation to the education system, but on the odd occasion has been used or developed in other discourses.

Use of Bourdieu's cultural capital can be broken up into a number of basic categories. First, are those who explore the theory as a possible means of explanation or employ it as the framework for their research.¹⁹ Second, are those who build on or expand Bourdieu's theory. Finally, there are those who attempt to disprove Bourdieu's findings or to discount them in favour of an alternative theory. The majority of these

¹⁹ Mustafa Emirbayer and Victoria Johnson *Theory and Society*, Volume 37, Number 1 / February, 2008, Pages 1-44

works deal with Bourdieu's theory in relation to education, only a small number apply his theory to other instances of inequality in society.

Traditional use of concept

Those researchers and theorists who explore or employ Bourdieu's theory use it in a similar way as it was articulated by Bourdieu. They usually apply it uncritically, and depending on the measurable indicators of cultural capital and the fields within which they measure it, Bourdieu's theory either works to support their argument totally, or in a qualified way. These works help to portray the usefulness of Bourdieu's concept in analysing (mainly educational) inequality but they do not add anything to the theory.

One work which does employ Bourdieu's work in an enlightening way is that of Emirbayer & Williams (2008)²⁰ who use Bourdieu's notion of fields and capital to examine the power relations in the field of social services, particularly homeless shelters. The authors talk of the two separate fields that operate in the same geographic location (the shelter) and the types of capital that are legitimate and valued in each. Specifically they show how homeless people can possess "staff-sanctioned capital" or "client-sanctioned capital"

Expansion of concept

A number of works expand Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital in a beneficial manner, without deviating from Bourdieu's framework of the different forms of capital. In fact, these authors can be seen to explore unarticulated areas of Bourdieu's theory as opposed to constructing a new theory. For instance, Stanton-Salazar & Dornbusch (1995)²¹ examine how those people with the desired types of cultural (and linguistic) capital in a school transform this capital into "instrumental relations" or social capital with institutional agents who can transmit valuable resources to the person, furthering their success in the school. They state that this is simply an elaboration of Bourdieu's theory.

²⁰ Emirbayer, M., & Williams, E., (2005) "Bourdieu and Social Work" in *Social Service Review*, v.79, i.4 p689-725

²¹ Stanton-Salazar, R., & Dornbusch, S., (1995) "Social Capital and the Reproduction of Inequality: information networks among Mexican-origin high school students" in *Sociology of Education* (Albany), v.68, i.2

Similarly, Dumais (2002)²² introduces the variable of gender to determine the ability of cultural capital to increase educational achievement. The author shows how gender and social class interact to produce different benefits from cultural capital. In fact in *Distinction* (1984:107), Bourdieu states “sexual properties are as inseparable from class properties as the yellowness of lemons is inseparable from its acidity”. He simply did not articulate the differences attributable to gender in his general theory of reproduction in the education system. That allows a certain thing to exist, or not exist....that is the question.

On the other hand, two authors have introduced new variables into Bourdieu’s concept of cultural capital. Emmison & Frow’s (1998)²³ work centres on an exploration of the ability of Information Technology to be considered a form of cultural capital. The authors state that “a familiarity with, and a positive disposition towards the use of bourgeoisie technologies of the information age can be seen as an additional form of cultural capital bestowing advantage on those families that possess them”. Specifically computers are “machines”²⁴ that form a type of objectified cultural capital, and the ability to use them is an embodied type of cultural capital. This work is useful because it shows the ways in which Bourdieu’s concept of cultural capital can be expanded and updated to include cultural goods and practices which are progressively more important in determining achievement both in the school and without.

Hage uses Bourdieu’s theory of cultural capital to explore multiculturalism and racism in Australia. His discussion around race is distinct from Bourdieu’s treatment of migrants and their amount of linguistic capital and habitus. Hage actually conceives of “whiteness” (in Dolby, 2000:49) as being a form of cultural capital. ‘White’ is not a stable, biologically determined trait, but a “shifting set of social practices”²⁵. He conceptualises the nation as a circular field, with the hierarchy moving from the powerful centre (composed of ‘white’ Australians) to the less powerful periphery (composed of the

²² Dumais, S., (2002) “Cultural Capital, Gender, and School Success: the role of habitus” in *Sociology of Education*, v.75, i.1, pp.44–68

²³ Emmison, M., & Frow, J., (1998) “Information Technology as Cultural Capital” in *Australian Universities Review*, Issue 1/1998, p.41-45

²⁴ Bourdieu, 1986:47

²⁵ Dolby, 2000:49

‘others’). The ‘others’ however are not simply dominated, but are forced to compete with each other for a place closer to the centre. This use of

Bourdieu’s notion of capital and fields is extremely illuminating to understand how people of non-Anglo ethnicities may try and exchange the cultural capital of their ethnic background with that of ‘whiteness’ to gain a higher position in the hierarchy. It is especially useful to see it in these terms as it exposes the arbitrary nature of what is “Australian”, and how it is determined by those in the dominant position (mainly ‘white’ Australians).

CONCLUSION

Pierre Bourdieu's work has only recently begun to have an impact on the academic study of various issues of society, but his relevance promises to grow over the coming years. He is cited by several authors in important critical overviews of the field of sociological studies (Taylor, 1998; Braun and McCutcheon, 2000); a number of papers working with his ideas have appeared in relevant journals (e.g. Bell, 1990; Swartz, 1996; Berlinerblau, 1999); and two programme units of the discipline’s largest learned society, the American Academy of Religion, have held recent sessions on the relevance of his work.

What connects contemporary theory to the long history of social thought, spanning Socrates to Bourdieu and beyond, is a shared interest in understanding and explaining the characteristics and features of human group life. At the heart of sociological theory lies the concern to understand the relationship between the individual and society, the significance of social change, and the ways in which people come to perceive, act upon, and exist in the everyday world. Sociological theories have always focused on how the social world can be known or explained, and they have always been designed with the intention of explaining what makes human collective life possible. Although historical and contemporary contributions to sociological theory can sometimes be very difficult to comprehend, one should never lose sight of the fact that theories are always designed to explain the basic features of human group life.

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