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Bourdieu on Status, Class and Culture

Distinctions. A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste. Pierre Bourdieu 1979, translated by Richard Nice, publ. Harvard University Press, 1984.

If social class is defined by relation to the means of production, this still does not tell us how classes are *constituted as classes*, nor how the complex status hierarchies of capitalist societies are articulated and internalised by individuals or how other systems of status subordination are integrated within a class system of domination. On its own, possession of greater or lesser title to means of production (“economic capital”) in fact explains very little about the dynamics of bourgeois society.

Pierre Bourdieu claims to show at great length and detail (in reference to 1960s/70s France) how the knowledge and use of cultural artefacts and the body, and the taste which people develop for culture (everything from food, clothing and life-style to preferences in painting and music) constitute multiply sublimated transformations of a single relation of dominant to dominated class, moderating the myriad of struggles between classes and class fractions in modern capitalist society. He shows how people learn to tailor their expectations and their own view of themselves to their place in a hierarchy of political power and their share in the social product, at the same time as finding vehicles to *contest* the place a class fraction has in that hierarchy and the place an individual can lay claim to in a given class fraction.

Bourdieu also claims an understanding of how other deep-seated relations of subordination, especially age and gender, merge with economic and cultural relations of subordination in sublimated forms, shedding light on how multiple forms of subordination articulate with one another. However, I find the way Bourdieu tries to turn all these pairs of opposites into a single, universal ordering principle, such that all dichotomous ordering principles are in some sense ‘the same’, an aspect of his thinking which is best dispensed with. It actually adds nothing to what he has achieved.

Let us clarify some of the main concepts Bourdieu uses.

Capital

Let us take it as read that the concept of “economic” capital is understood, and that it can take various forms – factories, stockpiles, intellectual property, shares, finance capital, and so on. What is required then, to justify the concept of *forms of capital* which are “non-economic” is to establish that they can be *converted* into “economic capital,” and thus that everything deemed to be a form of capital can be arranged, under some specified condition, along a single axis, i.e., quantified. Here is how Bourdieu deals with this problem.

Projection onto a single axis, in order to construct the continuous, linear, homogenous, one-dimensional series with which the social hierarchy is normally identified, implies an extremely difficult (and, if it is unwitting, extremely dangerous) operation, whereby the different types of capital are reduced to a single standard. This abstract operation has an objective basis in the possibility, which is always available, of converting one type of capital into another;

however, the exchange rates vary in accordance with the power relation between the holders of the different forms of capital. By obliging one to formulate the principle of the convertibility of the different kinds of capital, which is the precondition for reducing the space to one dimension, the construction of a two-dimensional space makes it clear that the exchange rate of the different kinds of capital is one of the fundamental stakes in the struggles between class fractions whose power and privileges are linked to one or the other of these types. In particular, this exchange rate is a stake in the struggle over the dominant principle of domination (economic capital, cultural capital or social capital), which goes on at all times between the different fractions of the dominant class. (p. 125)

Thus Bourdieu extends the concept of capital according to an underlying concept which only in principle relies on convertibility into capital in the normal economic sense. Bourdieu does not do us the favour, however, of explicitly spelling out what this underlying concept is, which maintains itself across different forms of capital. The in-principle convertibility of different forms of capital allows us to surmise from the place of capital in capitalist society a general notion of 'capital' as Bourdieu sees it. Marx's definition of capital in terms of M-C-M' gives us a 'formative' definition of economic capital, but the whole of social theory is required to see the impact of owning economic capital on social life, a 'summative' definition, so to speak. Likewise, the entirety of Bourdieu's work is required to demonstrate the impact of capital in his generalised sense on social life and what it means to a person to own it. A neat definition is not required.

Capital is the resource, command of which, enables one to exercise and resist domination in social relations, or putting it another way, to maintain a position in the status hierarchy of society, or putting it more objectively, capital is an 'organising principle'. 'Composition of capital' thus refers to the composition of total capital of cultural and economic capital (with the other types of capital playing a subordinate role), creating a 'plane' across which dominance increases monotonically towards the top-right corner (economic capital +, cultural capital +) but with the gradient at every point on the plane subject to contestation.

Thus, 'capital' in this sense, is capable of ordering the relation between any two people, in any given part of social space, but in reality such an ordering principle does not necessarily produce a *complete* ordering of society, along a single axis of subordination.

I think it is fair to say that this conception marks Bourdieu's concept of capital off from the broader, more intuitive concept of 'wealth'. The use and maintenance of the various forms of capital is not about enjoyment (i.e., of wealth) but of work (i.e., of social production).

Conceived in this way, 'capital' could span across different social formations, not only bourgeois society, representing the degree of command a subject has over whatever it is in a given society or social stratum, which confers the capacity to subordinate others. But Bourdieu does not go there.

Bourdieu accepts 'economic capital' as the dominant principle of domination in capitalist society, but observes that the efficacy of economic capital as a

principle of domination is constantly under challenge by fractions of the dominant class (e.g. artists, professionals, academics, etc.) who are relatively poor in economic capital, but who by dint of their social role, wealth in cultural or other forms of capital, strive to enhance their own specific form of capital as a rival principle of domination.

This conception is not dissimilar to the struggles which have gone on down the centuries between landed property, industrial capital and finance capital. Once it is granted that, for example, possession of the capacity to define what is valid art (or science or body-shape or life-style, or 'connections' for example) by those capable of elaborating it, it can be seen to be a powerful lever of domination, and it seems not unreasonable to designate command of such authority as a 'form of capital'. Thus struggles in the domain of art (or science or body-shape or life-style) take on the appearance of struggles within the dominant class, just like the struggles between landed property, industrial capital and finance capital.

Field and Habitus

Bourdieu sees the social world through the lens of *field* and *habitus*, complementary concepts representing the social and psychological processes which moderate the actions and attitudes of individuals so that stable systems of interpersonal and class relationships spontaneously reproduce themselves.

A field is broadly an institution, a normative and evolving set of rules, roles and relationships which determine how various rewards such as status, authority, income or autonomy are distributed among individuals acting in roles within the field. Examples of fields are the state, academia, the world of romance, the art world, the village, etc., where different capabilities are rewarded with appropriate roles bringing commensurate rights, responsibilities and rewards. The field thus motivates participants to carry out the functions of the field as if it were their own and ensure the maintenance of the field.

The field acts somewhat analogously to an ecosystem or habitat, and habitus describes the kind of creatures that live in that habitat. These concepts capture very successfully how people apparently occupying disadvantaged positions in a social formation, actively seek to maintain that position and 'police the boundaries', so to speak, punishing individuals who stray outside the norms appropriate to the given field, by adopting features or practices which are denigrated in that field.

Class and habitus

The concept of 'habitus', borrowed from Aquinas, plays an important role in Bourdieu's theory.

To reconstruct what has been pulled apart [the different practices performed in different fields] ... one must return to the practice-unifying and practice-generating principle, i.e., the class habitus, the internalised form of the class condition and of the conditionings it entails. (p. 101)

and

Social class is not defined solely by a position in the relations of production, but by the class habitus which is 'normally' (i.e., with a

high statistical probability) associated with that position. (p. 372)

Thus the 'habitus' is the "internalised form of the class condition and of the conditionings" by which a member of the class knows, without thinking about it, just how to react to different cultural stimuli, what he or she finds "pretentious" or "vulgar" or "gawdy" rather than "attractive" or "dignified" or "beautiful." Habitus is not a direct reflection of the conditions of existence of a class, but a sensibility acquired through a life-time and an upbringing in those conditions and the possibilities they include or exclude, with a future (including a future for one's children) which offers prospects, or on the other side, a past remembered when things were better or gains were made.

Thus, whether a person *actually* has money, or skills or education or family, in practice turns out to be secondary to the habitus they have acquired, which may, under unusual circumstances, be at odds with the life-style and attitudes, the way of using the body, command of language, friends and contacts, preferences in art and aspirations, etc., etc., which are *normally* associated with those conditions. Thus we have the phenomena of the miner's son who leaves town to become a dancer, or the junior clerk who bluffs his way into being accepted as a well-heeled investor and by good luck turns pretension into reality, and so on. But the point is that these are rarities. The wealthy man's son is accepted into a management position despite knowing nothing about the business while the skilled worker waits a lifetime for promotion – that is the norm.

While Bourdieu was very successful in explaining the stasis and reproduction of cultural and social formations – his study of how mass higher education failed to improve the lot of the millions of lower class French people who entered the university for the first time in the 1960s, was a remarkable achievement for his approach – how the field and the habitus are changed perhaps by individuals who challenge its norms, or in some other way, is far less clear. In reality, fields and their habitus are constantly changing and I see nothing in Bourdieu's theory which is inherently static, but Bourdieu has failed to theorise the formation and change of fields and their habitus. Field and habitus are meso-level concepts which are amenable to theorising the mediation between agent and structure.

Cultural capital and educational capital

Cultural capital is the capacity to play the culture game (to use a term borrowed from Wittgenstein), to recognise the allusions made in a novel, what is being quoted or refused in a work of art, to know what and how to approve and disapprove, how to avoid the question if necessary, to have internalised appropriate manners and acquired a taste for appropriate art, to know the directors (or actors) of films, be they *avant garde* or popular, to know how to make dinner conversation, how to wear clothes, how to occupy space, how to look down your nose, and give or not give someone your time, and so forth – all those manners which infallibly identify you to others as a person of a culture, popular, *avant garde* or legitimate, with a likely trajectory in life (declining or rising), suitable to have access to certain circles or not, and with more or less right to have an opinion on political matters or whatever.

Thus ... the social order is progressively inscribed in people's minds. Social divisions become principles of division, organizing the image of the social world. Objective limits become a sense of limits, a

practical anticipation of objective limits acquired by experience of objective limits, a 'sense of one's place' which leads one to exclude oneself from the goods, persons, places and so forth from which one is excluded. (p. 471)

Bourdieu's research shows that possession of cultural capital is closely predicted by social origins. The bourgeois child knows the price of an Impressionist painting at auction and where it should hang in the drawing room, like the working class boy knows who won the World Cup and how to change a sparkplug. Professionals know from an early age who is a good director, like a working class youth knows the actors and actresses of popular cinema.

The educational system offers a way for parvenus to acquire culture and a certificate to prove it, but Bourdieu's research shows that "scholastic" culture can never quite duplicate the ease and depth of the cultural capital acquired by constant exposure at home. As the educational system is opened to wider and wider sections of the populace, a struggle goes on to redefine qualifications and jobs, and create new certificates, moving the goal posts so as to restore the social order, or on the other hand, to open new doors to young graduates. At the same time, there is a constant struggle going on between *rising* class fractions and those in *decline*, between technocratic executives with degrees in business management and all kinds of cultural mediators redefining their own life-styles upwards, while shopkeepers and skilled tradespeople, for example, inexorably decline, and so forth. The autodidact meanwhile, according to Bourdieu, enters a race which he has lost from the beginning.

Thus we have the phenomena which Bourdieu describes as judgments of classification which are themselves classified and classifying acts. As is well-known in respect to all internecine struggles, no distinction is so important as the distinction between social neighbours, and thus one has all the acts of *refusal* in which what is valued by one is refused by the other, obvious in respect to *avant garde* art in relation to legitimate art.

The main axis of these struggles is *within* the dominant class, between those who lack economic capital, against those wealthy bourgeois who, relatively speaking lack culture, with professionals of various kinds promoting their own status by trying to shift the dominant principle of domination towards cultural means, distinguishing themselves from the uncultured wealthy by emphasising taste for the refined and off-beat, as against the acquisition of rare and expensive cultural goods. And on the other side, among those lacking in economic capital, among the dominated classes, to promote the sensibilities of professional skills acquired by hard work through the public education system or artistic production, to gain entry to the lower ranks of the dominant class. At the same time, the working class, making a virtue of necessity, call to order anyone of their number who gets above themselves and threatens class solidarity.

Appreciation of culture is thus reduced, with little or no residue, to *pretension* – people acquire and express a taste which expresses their pretension to be recognised in a given class fraction, refusing the vulgar or the common, the difficult or the fancy, according to the need for distinction. The whole business of cultural appreciation is reduced by Bourdieu to a status game.

Social capital, body capital, linguistic capital, political capital

Although cultural capital and economic capital constitute the principal axes of subordination within capitalist society, Bourdieu talks of other forms of capital as well. *Social capital* are 'connections' needed, in particular, to make use of one's cultural or *scholastic* capital (certificates). *Body capital*, both given by nature and that acquired through the socially-approved diet and exercise regime and so on, also constitutes a resource which gives an individual leverage in social struggles. *Linguistic capital* is basically a subset of cultural capital contained in appropriate ease in the command of language. *Political capital* is standing in the political world and the ability to command votes and support in political conflicts.

Since all these types of 'capital' share the conditions of production of economic and cultural capital, not a great deal of time is spent giving them special consideration.

Cultural relativism

At the end of reading *Distinctions* one is left with the impression of an extreme relativism in cultural criticism; everything it appears is appreciated solely for the purpose of establishing markers of one's social status, albeit unconsciously. The book therefore concludes with a critique of Kantian and other aesthetics and he comes very close to pure relativism. 'Real motives' are everywhere disguised or sublimated.

Taste responds to two kinds of stimuli, on the one hand the pleasure connected with basic human needs, on the other, basically 'quotation' and 'association' which refer to other points in the cultural universe in a kind of 'in-group' conversation. This creates distance from the material world and entry to an ultimately social world structured and populated by cultural references and the social universe of the dominant class.

According to Bourdieu, all the dichotomies of cultural criticism are successive sublimations of one basic distinction between the dominated class and dominant class, beginning with animal nature versus human culture, therefore crude/heavy versus fine/light and so on.

These distinctions can undergo inversion when the dominated fractions of the dominant class use the same contrast to indicate ascetic/serious versus light-weight/frivolous, etc. in distinction both to the culturally poor, economically dominant bourgeoisie, and the simple enjoyments of the unpretentious worker.

Bourdieu also finds that the basic dichotomies of gender and age are deployed to express or reinforce distinctions of cultural dominance. So for example, one has the contest between immature/mature against youthful/aged, and all the contested markers of antique subordination penetrate and express the language of cultural subordination.

So although the dominant class's appreciation of art is sublimated through multiple shifts, it is basically stimulating the same need for a feeling of distinction or distance from the crude necessity of the life of the dominated classes. Through multiple sublimation, culture constitutes itself as a relatively independent domain, but the taste for a work of art can ultimately be traced back to the pleasures of enjoyment or domination.

Thus, we have a window into the class struggles as it is played out in the domain of culture:

Taste is at the heart of these symbolic struggles, which go on at all times between the fractions of the dominant class and which would be less absolute, less total, if they were not based on the primary belief which binds each agent to his life-style. A materialist reduction of preferences to their economic and social conditions of production and to the social functions of the seemingly most disinterested practices must not obscure the fact that, in matters of culture, investments are not only economic but also psychological. Conflicts over art or the art of living, in which what is really at stake is the imposition of the dominant principle of domination within the dominant class – or, to put it another way, the securing of the best conversion rate for the type of capital with which each group is best provided – would not be so dramatic if they did not involve the ultimate values of the person, a highly sublimated form of interests. (p. 310)

Idealism

Bourdieu could be open to a charge of ‘idealism’ by virtue of the fact that he has removed the means of domination from production of the means of existence. However, this charge does not stick, for he shows well enough that the class habitus is basically making a virtue of necessity; taste has its origins in the conditions of production of its characteristic modes of life.

He observes that the means of domination has shifted:

substituting seduction for repression, public relations for policing, advertising for authority, the velvet glove for the iron fist, pursues the symbolic integration of the dominated classes by imposing needs rather than inculcating norms. (p. 153-4)

Thus the mode of domination is inextricably connected to the system of needs and the mode of their satisfaction.

Objectivism

Reading *Distinctions* also leaves one with an overwhelming feeling of *objectivism*, in the sense that all the social agents appear to be pursuing illusions – tastes and desires which derive from unconscious internalisations of their social position. “Culture is the ultimate fetish,” he says, and there undoubtedly is such a pessimistic flavour to the work, but it is nuanced.

In his analysis of the French newspapers, Bourdieu shows how the culture addresses itself to the bourgeois as “subjects of history, or at least subjects of a discourse about history,” whereas the habitus of the working class, centres around the worker as *object* of politics, whose only political voice is that delegated to a spokesperson who speaks in the language of the dominant class.

The social arrangements reflected in Bourdieu’s analysis therefore capture the form of rule active in bourgeois society. There is no suggestion, however, of how the working class, acclimatised to subordination and ruling themselves out of matters of state, could transform themselves into subjects of history.

With mass market cultural products – music whose simple repetitive structures invite a passive, absent participation, prefabricated entertainments which the new engineers of cultural mass production design for television viewers, and especially sporting events which establish a recognised division between the spectators and the professionals, virtuosos of an esoteric technique or ‘supermen’ of exceptional ability – dispossession of the very intention of recognition of dispossession. (p. 386)

Political Opinion Formation

Somewhat as an aside from the main argument, as part of a critique of the naïve use of questionnaires to measure political opinion, Bourdieu refers to three modes of political opinion formation:

first, a *class ethos*, a generative formula not constituted as such which enables objectively coherent responses, compatible with the practical premises of a practical relation to the world, to be generated for all the problems of everyday existence.

Secondly, it may be a systematic political ‘slant’ (*parti*), a system of explicit, specifically political principles, amenable to logical control and reflexive scrutiny, in short, a sort of political ‘axiomatics’ (in ordinary language, a ‘line’ or a ‘programme’) ...

Thirdly, it may be a two-stage choice, i.e., the identification, in the mode of knowledge, of the answers consistent with the ‘line’ of a political party, this time in the sense of an organisation providing a political ‘line’ on a set of problems which it constitutes as political. (p. 418)

All collective forms of subjectivity seem to have been dissolved here, with growing individualism and reliance on the mass media, enormously destructive of the psyche of working class people, let alone the unemployed and young.

Systems of Status Subordination

According to Nancy Fraser, capitalist society is marked by the co-existence of two forms of subordination, “the class structure and the status order,” (*Redistribution or Recognition*, 2003) and according to Fraser, it is necessary to utilise two different systems of concepts to grasp the two systems of subordination, and understand the interaction between the two.

Bourdieu’s approach to subordination along multiple axes is a kind of utilitarian analysis whereby individuals choose a strategy which maximises their benefit for the particular composition of capital that they have command of, in combination with the struggle by classes to valorise their own life-style in competition with others. But Bourdieu treats economic capital as just one measure ordering one of a number of status orders. Cultural capital and economic capital are orthogonal but so also are social capital, body capital, etc.

Thus we have the observation that (in 1960s France) working class women don’t bother about their appearance and prefer to be home-makers and make their men happy, because the jobs on offer for them are rotten anyway, while the daughters of the bourgeoisie dress-up, get educated and corner prestigious jobs as ‘cultural mediators’ because this offers the optimum route to improving

or maintaining their own status.

Bourdieu is also attuned to a lot of the observations found in Fraser's work, such as the deployment of gender stigmatisation on gendered forms of labour, with consequences such as male nurses suffering from low pay and the pay rates of trades falling when they become open to women, and so forth.

There is a sense in which Bourdieu's (mainly) two-dimensional map of social space expresses Fraser's idea of two systems of subordination, and there is quite a lot of overlap between the two different approaches.

Social Capital Theory

"Social capital" plays a secondary role in Bourdieu's theory; someone who aspires to move up the social hierarchy who has accumulated the necessary qualification and taste, still needs connections for their qualifications to be translated into admission to a class fraction of higher status. It is hard to see how this concept could be broadened into a "third dimension," with the kind of weight it has in "social capital" theory.

The difference between this extension of the concept of capital from that of people like Robert Putnam is that Bourdieu brings the economic and non-economic entities into relation with one another through the in-principle convertibility of cultural, social and economic capital, and by means of a broader conception of social subordination, from which both notions of (economic) capital and cultural (or social, etc.) capital can be derived.

In contrast, Putnam et al take the bourgeois fetishistic theory of capital as a given, and extend the fetishism into non-economic relationships. For Putnam, social capital is like 'natural capital' – something which by its very nature cannot be acquired as personal property, but is a condition for production and accumulation. For Coleman however, social capital is closer to Bourdieu's social capital, being a resource which an individual owns and deploys for personal gain and which can be converted into economic capital.

Bourdieu clearly breaks with Marx's conception of capital, but does so in a way which acknowledges its own break in attempting to take Marx's critique of political economy a step further, rather than simply ignoring it.

Axel Honneth's criticism of Bourdieu

According to Axel Honneth (*The Fragmented World of the Social. Essays in Social and Political Philosophy*, 1990), Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital suffers from a fatal ambiguity: on the one hand, his empirical researches highlight how social groups and individuals cultivate *distinction* for their own life-style and tastes in *contrast* to those of other, lower strata, by making use of whatever social assets they have to make their own life-style take on the aura of exclusiveness; on the other hand, social groups express their own values in terms of distinctive social practices and demand *recognition* for the intrinsic worth of these practices from society at large, refusing to adopt instead, *other* tastes and life-styles which may already enjoy more general social appreciation.

Capital however, if it is to underpin a status order, is the value given to one's property by society at large, by *everyone else*. It is *quantitative, abstract-general*, not qualitative and *unique* in its value. If distinctions were a form of capital, then the value of possessing them is precisely that everyone *else* values

them, so accumulating capital means getting hold of things that *other* people value, even if you do not value the stuff yourself at all. Equally, the strategy of vesting value in something that you already monopolise has exactly the same logic. If no-one values what you do, you will be poor; being poor *means* that no-one values what you do and have. Recognition and material self-interest are in perfect accord here.

The point is, I think, that cultural capital is not portable to the same degree as economic capital. Your ability to appreciate artworks doesn't help you in the pub or the supermarket, but still, it does help you in the academic staffroom. But equally a bank account has little worth in the jungle. Capital is always dependent on the social conditions in which it may be exchanged.

Also, Honneth is wrong in his claim that Bourdieu's capital is simply qualitative: it is qualitative in the same sense as finance capital, landed property and industrial capital are qualitative. Although the convertibility of different forms of Bourdieu's capital is partial and problematic, they are in principle convertible.

Subjectivity

As remarked above, Bourdieu is quite pessimistic about the prospects for the working class or any part thereof, transforming themselves from objects into subjects of history, and indeed, he observes that those who act as spokespeople for the working class are forced to adopt the language of the dominant class in order just to express the political demands of the working class.

On the other hand, his description of the class habitus, contributing as it does to the understanding of class consciousness, and his elucidation of the mechanisms of class struggle within the domain of culture, should give clues about a way forward in the struggle against capitalism and the kind of barriers that radical politics faces.

Certainly, Bourdieu provides an impressive exposé of professional and petit-bourgeois claims to high pay and status, as against the under-valued skills and labour of the working-class. There is a sense in which Bourdieu's philosophically inclined analysis expresses in the most cultured possible way, the spontaneous working-class prejudice that bourgeois culture is nothing more than a pretension aimed to make its connoisseurs look smarter while making working class people look stupid, demeaning even their body-shape. In that sense his conceptions are very egalitarian.

Conclusion

One has to appreciate the power of Bourdieu's insight into how an entire social formation, like modern-day capitalism, is internalised in the most intimate feelings and desires of its people. But this is just arranging the deck chairs on the Titanic.

It is like Kuhn's sociology of science minus Kuhn's paradigm shifts which are the really exciting part of Kuhn's theory. Everyone understands nowadays how scientists write papers for recognition, promotion, overseas travel and so on, not just in pursuit of truth. But the fact is that science gets done nonetheless. If Bourdieu's critique applies to art, why not science, why not sociology? All these institutions have an objective basis irrespective of delivering rewards to

the participants of the given institution, and the objective basis of an institution also provides motivation for the individual participants.

It is good to have such a rich theory of social statics, but what we really need is a theory of social dynamics. We need a theory of movement for fields. But is 'field' a concept amenable to a theory of change? Do individuals change their habitus or the field through their struggle? Or do fields change objectively in response to the disclosure of contradictions or as a result of interaction with other fields? These are open questions which Bourdieu does not help us answer.