

Paul DiMaggio

Comment on John Goldthorpe/2

(doi: 10.2383/24757)

Sociologica (ISSN 1971-8853)

Fascicolo 2, settembre-ottobre 2007

Ente di afferenza:

()

Copyright © by Società editrice il Mulino, Bologna. Tutti i diritti sono riservati.
Per altre informazioni si veda <https://www.rivisteweb.it>

Licenza d'uso

Questo articolo è reso disponibile con licenza CC BY NC ND. Per altre informazioni si veda <https://www.rivisteweb.it/>

Comment on John Goldthorpe/2

by Paul DiMaggio

doi: 10.2383/24757

A reader of Professor Goldthorpe's paper who was not familiar with Pierre Bourdieu's work might wonder why Bourdieu is such a celebrated figure. The International Sociological Association named *Distinction* one of the ten most important sociological works of the 20th century.¹ Craig Calhoun [2000] referred to Bourdieu as "the most influential and original French sociologist since Durkheim." Even French Prime Minister Jospin and President Chirac (both long subjects of his harsh criticism) produced tributes upon his death, Chirac lamenting France's loss of one of "her most talented and most world-renowned intellectuals" and Jospin describing him "a master of contemporary sociology and a great figure in [French] intellectual life."² How could such praise be lavished on a scholar about whom Professor Goldthorpe writes that his only sound ideas were unoriginal and his only original ideas were unsound?

I would submit that only a narrow and ungenerous reading of Bourdieu's work can yield such a conclusion. It is not so much that Professor Goldthorpe's *specific* criticisms of Bourdieu are incorrect – indeed, Bourdieu's critics *and* admirers have been raising many of these points for years. Rather the problem is Professor Goldthorpe's laser focus on the most vulnerable concepts in and predictions derivable from Bourdieu's work to the exclusion of its merits. Were his critique taken as

¹ Bourdieu had three books in all on the ISA "50 Most Important" list – *Distinction* at #6, *Logic of Practice* at #40 and *Reproduction* at #8 – two more than the other two French authors on the list (Durkheim and Foucault). See Swartz 2002.

² Jospin is quoted in "Pierre Bourdieu Dies at 71, French Sociologist, Philosopher." *Washington Post*, January 26, 2002, p. B06. Chirac in "Communiqué de M. Jacques Chirac Président de la République à la suite du décès de M. Pierre Bourdieu." 24 janvier 2002 <http://www.elysee.fr>, last referenced July 17, 2007.

dispositive, it would both deter readers from exploiting a fertile source of sociological insight *and at the same time* distract attention from more serious and productive criticisms to which the Bourdieuan tradition in the study of education is vulnerable, and out of which real progress may result.³

I can perhaps best address the charge that Bourdieu's work on education is unoriginal by explaining why, as a graduate student specializing in the sociology of education, I found it revelatory – even as I was skeptical (based on my reading of current empirical literature) of the empirical accuracy of some of its implications. To be sure, many sociologists of education were writing about culture in a vague sort of way; but, except for Basil Bernstein and Randall Collins, it is difficult to think of any who were writing concretely about specific mechanisms that linked well-defined cultural phenomena to educational outcomes. For many, culture merely replaced human capital (now that scholars had figured out how to measure the latter) as the residual explanation. For some, “culture” was an invidious codeword for deficits associated with families outside the middle class. In the U.S., however, the most substantial work on educational attainment (and the kind with which I was most familiar) neglected culture altogether, favoring a combination of demographic and social-psychological explanatory strategies.

Why was Bourdieu's early work such a revelation? For several reasons. First, his notion of “cultural capital” (for all its faults) relied neither on social psychology nor deficits for its power, but rather viewed culture as a resource over which groups struggled (both to define certain cultural resources as valuable and to monopolize those resources that were so defined). Second, he provided a framework for measuring the possession of cultural capital at the individual level as command over specific cultural goods (in France, largely those associated with the arts and humanities). Third, his approach departed from the excessive individualism that characterized much work on educational attainment because it placed educational institutions at center stage, depicting individual-level models of attainment as historically contingent upon the institutional structures of the schools through which students were required to navigate. Finally, Bourdieu's theory of education also departed from the era's prevalent individualism by embodying a theory of social interaction (inspired in part by the work of Bernstein and Goffman) that specified that the effects of student characteristics and resources on educational outcomes were mediated by social relationships that those characteristics affected. One can cite precedents for or analogies to many ideas in Bourdieu's theory of education (of whose ideas on what topic can

³ This is not the place to such critical observations. For a discussion of some of them see DiMaggio [2001; 2004].

this not be said?) and even (in Randall Collins' work about the same time) significant complementary efforts. But no one had integrated reasoning about educational attainment into as comprehensive a theory of society, capable of generating hypotheses at the levels of analysis of school interactions, individual-level status-attainment models, or comparative historical research on educational institutions.

In an essay review of three of Bourdieu's books published in 1979, I predicted what Professor Goldthorpe refers to as the "domestication" of Bourdieu's ideas, which would, I argued, be "transformed (...) by their entry into American sociology, taken selectively as hypotheses or orienting propositions according to the process of assimilation and productive misreading that Robert Escarpit has called 'creative treason'" [DiMaggio 1979]. My early work on educational achievement and educational attainment set out to do precisely this: to integrate Bourdieu's perspective into the dominant "Wisconsin model" by operationalizing "cultural capital" using scales consisting of direct measures of students' interest and participation in the arts. Although Bourdieu's ideas about cultural capital resonated with Max Weber's work on status groups and status cultures, and although U.S. students of social stratification often claimed Weberian ancestry, measures of the cultural resources and preoccupations so central to Weber's theory of status closure had been absent from these models. It was my encounter with Bourdieu's work that convinced me that one could, indeed, integrate this part of Weber's work into this empirical tradition [DiMaggio 1982].

I am perplexed by Professor Goldthorpe's insistence that my departure from Bourdieu's epistemological priors and my failure to repudiate his ideas when I reported results that diverged from hypotheses inspired by his work somehow reflects "radical misconceptions" about and a "(mis)understanding of" Bourdieu and his work. This conclusion is especially puzzling because the paper's introduction laid out two sets of hypotheses based on alternative theoretical perspectives, only one of which drew on Bourdieu's work (and even that one justified as much in Weberian as in Bourdieuan terms). Professor Goldthorpe's charge that I got Bourdieu wrong (when, in fact, I merely appropriated some of his ideas to my own efforts to understand educational achievement) makes sense only if one believes that a sociologist who borrows another's terminology or concept must take an oath of fealty, committing heart and soul to the entire package.

Far from taking the oath, I knowingly committed what, from a Bourdieuan standpoint, was a kind of triple apostasy. First, I employed precisely the positivist analytic approach that Bourdieu had condemned. That choice was based on my belief about how one should do science. Second, I applied observations about the nature of cultural capital that Bourdieu developed in France to research on the United States. Bourdieu regarded his analytic framework as broadly applicable, but he was admir-

ably clear that the particular content of “cultural capital” could never be assumed to be similar cross-nationally (and, I suspect, he shared a general European skepticism as to whether knowledge of high culture would count for much in the business-obsessed United States). My choice here was based on earlier research on arts participation in the U.S., which led me to believe that we Americans were not so different as Europeans suspected. Third, I controlled for test scores as if they were reliable measures of academic ability and distinguishable from cultural capital. This reflected my determination that granting the conventional view that academic ability (as measured by test scores) is less socially constructed than taste – an argument that was not about to be settled empirically in any case – would, although contestable, have the advantage of putting Bourdieu’s ideas to a particularly rigorous test.

As Professor Goldthorpe recognizes, the paper confirmed that, consistent with Bourdieu’s intuitions, cultural capital *did* have a significant influence on students’ grades; but that, in contrast to what Bourdieu would predict (and consistent with the opposing hypothesis laid out in the paper’s introduction), the link between family background and cultural capital was weak, especially for young men, who seemed to benefit from engagement with high culture only if they were upwardly mobile. (Highly educated parents were more successful in passing down cultural capital to their daughters). Thus social reproduction was not so strong (in the U.S.) as Bourdieu believed it to be (in France). But on the major point, which I take to be the insight that the educational system rewards families and students capable of appropriating prestigious culture, Bourdieu’s insights were validated (and have continued to be in research on cultural capital and educational attainment in countries throughout the world undertaken over the past quarter century) [DiMaggio 2001]. These results are so commonplace that we take them for granted. But in the 1970s, the fact that a measure of “cultural capital” could exert nearly as much influence on grades as measured ability was big news.

Professor Goldthorpe places the theory of social reproduction at the center of Bourdieu’s work, a reasonable choice given that Bourdieu entitled his major book on the topic *Reproduction*. Why then was my appreciation of Bourdieu’s contribution so little shaken by the discovery that the class system was more porous than Bourdieu appeared to believe? Perhaps it was because I didn’t take that part of Bourdieu’s argument very seriously. In the 1960s and 1970s, people on the left spoke of class, over-estimated class persistence, and rejected regression analysis. Less radical scholars spoke of multiple measures of status, embraced regression analysis, and (with some notable exceptions) tended to underestimate the persistence of inequality. It had become apparent (as a result of work like Professor Goldthorpe’s *Affluent Worker*) that conventional notions of classes as solidary communities were decreasingly

serviceable and that we would have to come up with a better way to think about economically competitive collective social action [Goldthorpe *et al.* 1969].

Bourdieu's insistence on high levels of social reproduction reflected the fact that neither his training in philosophy, his immersion in the Marxian currents of the Parisian left, nor his earlier anthropological work equipped him to deal with a class-analytic paradigm that was in the middle of imploding. Had he been a statistically trained sociologist, he might have recognized that the issue was not whether there was upward social mobility – it was obvious that there was quite a lot of it – but whether that mobility was exchange mobility (children from well-to-do and working-class families trading places) or structural mobility (upward mobility required to accommodate changes in the occupational structure, even in the face of the reproductive mechanisms he described). Or he might have exploited more fully his notion of *habitus*, which in linking mobility strategies to expectations forged through lived experience militates away from a mechanistic view of class (in so far as constitutive life chances are heterogeneous within class boundaries). What Bourdieu brought to the table, once one got past this residual rhetoric of class, was a renewal of Weber's emphasis on status as process, and status groups as entities that employ culture as a source of solidarity and means of claims-making. Bourdieu really warmed up, it seemed to me, not when he wrote not about “classes,” but when he wrote about “class fractions,” which had more in common with Weber's status groups than Marx's classes. It was this aspect of his theory, along with his keen insights into the embedding of inequality in social interaction (including the neglected notion of “social capital” subsequently taken up by others) and his focus on institutions and the politics of knowledge, that appeared to me to offer enduring value.⁴

Perhaps my quarrel with Professor Goldthorpe's essay comes down to a disagreement over what we owe social theorists and what we are entitled to expect from them. Relatively few theorists – Marx, Weber, Durkheim, Parsons, Bourdieu, Habermas, and a few others – have been ambitious enough to promulgate large-scale integrated theories of society that incorporate explanations at many levels of analysis that are applicable to many social processes and institutions. The very scope of generalization that this audacious enterprise requires ensures that its practitioners will often get things wrong, sometimes badly wrong (and, the more tightly coupled their

⁴ One must also mention Bourdieu's theory of the dynamics of fields (*champs*), and his contributions to the interpretive method, as well as to specific works on many important social institutions. A reader of Professor Goldthorpe's essay could be forgiven for thinking that the account of Bourdieu's theory in the “wild,” which focuses almost entirely on the notion of social reproduction and the “cultural arbitrary” (an unfortunate phrase that Bourdieu later regretted using because it was so universally misunderstood), was an account of Bourdieu's social theory as a whole, rather than a characterization of a portion of his early first work on advanced societies.

framework, the more wrong they are likely to be). If we simply dismiss the contributions of such scholars once we have ticked off a certain number (or perhaps aggregate mass) of errors, few if any would be left standing. Yet if such broad-gauge thinkers are good at what they do, their work provides analytic models, concepts, and ways of seeing that far outweigh their failures of empirical prediction.

Given these considerations, it seems less useful to deny Bourdieu's contribution by rehearsing what are by now well-known defects in particular arguments and predictions than to get on with the work of exploiting the remarkable intellectual legacy that he left us. Such exploitation requires vigorous criticism, to be sure, but criticism aimed not at dismissing Bourdieu's work, but at improving the quality of the research that his legacy has inspired.

References

Calhoun, C.

2000 "Pierre Bourdieu." Pp. 696-730 in *The Blackwell Companion to the Major Social Theorists*, edited by G. Ritzer. Cambridge: MA: Blackwell.

DiMaggio, P.

1979 "Review Essay on Pierre Bourdieu." *American Journal of Sociology* 84: 1460-1474.

1982 "Cultural Capital and School Success: The Impact of Status Culture Participation in the Grades of U.S. High School Students." *American Sociological Review* 47: 189-201.

2001 "Social Stratification, Life-Style, Social Cognition and Social Participation." Pp. 542-552 in *Social Stratification: Class, Race and Gender in Sociological Perspective*, edited by David B. Grusky. 2nd edition. Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press.

2004 "Cultural Capital." in *Encyclopedia of Social Theory*, edited by G. Ritzer. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Goldthorpe, J., Lockwood, D., Bechhofer, F., and Platt, J.

1969 *The Affluent Worker in the Class Structure*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Swartz, D.

2002 "In Memoriam: Pierre Bourdieu: 1930-2002." *Theory and Society* 31: 547-53.

“Cultural Capital”: Some Critical Observations

Abstract: “Cultural capital” is a key concept in the work of Pierre Bourdieu. It plays a central role in Bourdieu’s account of the generation of class inequalities in educational attainment, which has evident affinities with those advanced by other sociologists of education; but also in his far more ambitious – though empirically unsustainable – theory of social reproduction. Much confusion can then be shown to arise from a failure to distinguish between the uses of the concept in the two quite differing contexts of what might be labelled as Bourdieu “domesticated” and Bourdieu “wild”. Researchers using the concept in the former context often fail to appreciate its radical nature and, in turn, the full extent to which their findings undermine Bourdieu’s theory of social reproduction; while those who would wish to understand the concept in the latter context have difficulty in showing its continuing fitness for research purposes, given the failure of the larger theory in which it is embedded. Advantage would follow from leaving the language of “cultural capital” to those who still seek to rescue this theory, and otherwise replacing it with a more differentiated conceptual approach.

Keywords: Bourdieu, cultural capital, social reproduction.

Paul DiMaggio is Professor of Sociology and past Chair (1996-99) of the Sociology Department at Princeton University. A former Executive Director of Yale University’s Program on Non-Profit Organizations (1982-87), through 1991 he was Professor in the Sociology Department, Institution for Social and Policy Studies, and School of Organization and Management at Yale. A graduate of Swarthmore College, he received his Ph.D. in Sociology from Harvard University in 1979. He has written widely on organizational analysis, on patterns of participation in the arts, cultural institutions and conflict in the U.S., and the social implications of new digital technologies. He is editor of *Nonprofit Enterprise in the Arts* (Oxford University Press, 1986), *The Twenty-First Century Firm* (Princeton University Press, 2001), and *The New Institutionalism in Organizational Analysis* (with Walter W. Powell); as well as author of *Managers of the Arts* (Seven Locks Press, 1986) and co-author, with Francie Ostrower, of *Race, Ethnicity, and Participation in the Arts* (Seven Locks Press, 1991). He has been a fellow at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences (1984-85) and a fellow of the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation (1990).