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“Cultural Capital”: Some Critical Observations

by John H. Goldthorpe

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Introduction

A reviewer of a paper submitted to a scientific journal is said to have concluded his report as follows. “There is much in this paper that is original and sound: the difficulty is that what is sound is not original and what is original is not sound.” This nicely captures the essence of the critique that I wish to make of the work of Pierre Bourdieu, and of others, in which “cultural capital” serves as a central concept.

I begin with some remarks on the research situation, within the sociology of education, that led Bourdieu first to develop the idea of cultural capital. My aim here is to show that the problems with which he was at least immediately concerned were at the time quite widely recognised; and, further, that the approach to these problems that Bourdieu developed was – up to a point – one followed by many other researchers similarly interested in cultural or subcultural influences on children’s educational attainment. However, I next seek to bring out the more distinctive features of Bourdieu’s approach. These are, I believe, closely linked to his introduction of, and insistence on, the concept of cultural capital, where others had spoken, in a more differentiated way, of cultural values and cultural resources. Cultural capital has been rightly described [Lareau and Weininger 2003, 568] as one of Bourdieu’s “signature concepts,” and it plays a key role in the grand project that he pursued of integrating an explanation of social class inequalities in educational attainment into a much wider-ranging theory of *social reproduction*.

I then go on to argue that in so far as Bourdieu’s work can be understood as “normal science” within an established paradigm in the sociology of education, it

may be subject to no more than standard forms of criticism; but that in so far as it is recognised as aiming to transcend this paradigm, it is open to criticism of a far more radical kind. The overarching theory of social reproduction can be shown to have serious inherent weaknesses and, further, to be overwhelmingly contradicted by empirical evidence. I conclude that, as a result of a failure to distinguish between these two possible perspectives on, and consequent evaluations of, Bourdieu's work, its reception in general and that of the concept of cultural capital in particular have come to display a divergence that is productive of much confusion.¹

Bourdieu and the Sociology of Educational Attainment

At the start of the 1960s, a broad consensus would appear to have existed regarding both the progress that had been made in research into the sociology of educational attainment and the problems that next called for attention. It was well established that inequalities in children's educational attainment, according to their social class, and also ethnic, origins, could not be explained simply in terms of individual variation in cognitive ability, as measured, say, by IQ. Leaving aside all questions of how IQ scores were to be interpreted, clear group differences in attainment were still apparent even when IQ was controlled. Moreover, there was a growing conviction that the further factors at work could not be limited to purely economic ones. The provision of secondary education on a free and universal basis had not succeeded in reducing inequalities in attainment to the extent that had been hoped for. There was thus wide agreement that what was further required was research that would go beyond simply establishing associations between the social characteristics of students and their educational performance, and that would seek "to specify the processes by which these characteristics are translated into differences in achievement" [Rossi 1961, 269]. And, in this respect, the main focus of interest was clearly moving away from processes involving economic constraints and incentives to ones grounded in differing cultures and modes of socialisation.

¹ Like all others who seek to comment on Bourdieu's work, I face the problem of the recurrent obscurity of his prose (whether he is read in the original French or English translation) and of the deep and what must, I believe, be often willed ambiguities in his arguments. On this account, it is always likely that criticism of his work will be met with charges of misunderstanding and misrepresentation. I have found it of value to check my own interpretations of what Bourdieu might be trying to say against the – generally sympathetic – expositions found in Jenkins [2002], Lareau and Weininger [2003] and Weininger [2005]. But these authors cannot of course be held responsible for the failures to appreciate the profundity of Bourdieu's thought of which I shall doubtless be accused. Although I have tried to read Bourdieu primarily in French, I give references to English translations (which may sometimes create an appearance of odd chronology).

Viewed in this context, the work in which Bourdieu engaged during the 1960s, chiefly in association with Passeron [see esp. Bourdieu and Passeron 1977; 1979], does not appear at all out of the ordinary. Statistical data are assembled in order to demonstrate persisting social class inequalities in educational attainment in France; and an explanation of these empirical regularities is put forward that, at least at one level, has evident affinities with those being concurrently developed by researchers concerned with similar inequalities in a number of other societies. The main emphasis is placed on causal processes arising out of what might be described as the degree of congruence between the cultures or subcultures into which children are socialised in their families and local communities and those that prevail in the schools and colleges that they attend.

For Bourdieu, one could say, the children of what he calls the “dominant class” are crucially advantaged over the children of subordinate classes in that they enter the educational system already well prepared to succeed within it. In their case, a clear continuity exists between the culture of the home and that of the school. These children will share a common mode of speech, style of social interaction and aesthetic orientation with their teachers, and neither the content of what they are taught (syllabus) nor the manner in which they are taught (pedagogy) are likely to appear strange to them. In contrast, for children from other class backgrounds, and especially for those of working-class or peasant origins, the school will represent an alien and indeed a hostile environment – a cultural and social world set apart from that of their families and communities, and one in which they are likely to feel out of place. Thus, while the children of the dominant class will progressively benefit from a positive interplay between the influences of home and school, children from less advantaged class backgrounds will find difficulties, and probably increasing difficulties, of adjustment. These latter children will then – other than in a few special cases – fail to reach the higher levels of the educational system, either because they are excluded by inadequate performance or because they in effect exclude themselves.

Described in these terms, Bourdieu’s account of how class inequalities in educational attainment are actually generated could be seen as having a good deal in common with those advanced in other well-known studies of the period. For example, from Britain one could cite Bernstein’s work [Bernstein 1961; 1965] stressing the importance of class differences in linguistic codes – to which Bourdieu [1977, 133] in fact refers;² or again Jackson and Marsden’s study [1963] of the problems of adjustment faced by working-class children selected to attend traditional grammar

² Indeed, in the earlier stages of his work Bourdieu sometimes refers to “linguistic” rather than cultural capital.

schools. And indeed other, chiefly American, research in this same area could be regarded as going beyond that of Bourdieu not only in its methodology, but also in the recognition of how class subcultural differences might be cross-cut and, perhaps, either intensified or offset by ethnic ones: as, for example, in the impressive study by Strodtbeck [1958; cf. also Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck 1961] of the contrasting implications for educational achievement of the socialisation of working-class children of Jewish and of Italian parentage.

However, the objection could – rightly – be made that the statement of Bourdieu's position that I have given above is inadequate, and precisely because it expresses this position in the concepts and idiom of the mainstream sociology of the day. It thus fails to do justice to the quite innovatory treatment of the problem of class inequalities in educational attainment that Bourdieu attempts: that is, through the incorporation of this problem within his much larger concern with processes of social reproduction.

Cultural Capital and Social Reproduction

Bourdieu's wish to speak of cultural capital, rather than of cultural values and resources, is clearly more than a matter of mere terminological preference. In this regard, the key text is his general statement on "forms of capital" and their significance for social reproduction [Bourdieu 1986]. What is here of central interest for Bourdieu is not just the factual distribution within society of resources of differing kinds but, further, the processes through which dominant classes effectively appropriate and monopolise these resources and use them to their own exclusive benefit – above all, in preserving their position of dominance in regard to subordinate classes. Economic capital is capital in the form of material wealth – "accumulated labour" – that is institutionalised in property rights and that then yields monetary returns, or profits, to its owners, allowing for further accumulation. Correspondingly, cultural capital is capital "embodied" in individual dispositions and competencies that give privileged access to such capital in its "objectified" form of cultural artefacts, and that is in turn institutionalised in criteria of cultural, including academic, evaluation and thus ultimately in educational qualifications that also provide returns to their holders. And Bourdieu further distinguishes, though with less elaboration, social capital as expressed in the possession of both informal and formal networks of acquaintance and recognition that give returns via "contacts," support and representation.

Apart from the ways in which forms of capital are thus institutionalised so as to best serve the interests of dominant classes, Bourdieu also stresses their shared

properties of being *convertible* and *transmissible*. One form of capital can always be, at least to some extent, converted into another; and all forms can be transmitted between individuals, whether through conversion or directly – as occurs most importantly between the individuals who make up the successive generations of families. Thus, for Bourdieu, it is the combination of institutional control over forms of capital together with processes of conversion and transmission that is crucial to the capacity of dominant classes to maintain their position – and therefore to social reproduction overall. The generalisation of the concept of capital provides the basis for an understanding of how dominant classes are able to extend and reinforce their power and privileges over all social domains, or “fields,” alike *and* over time.

Finally, as regards cultural capital specifically, there are two further – related – points that need to be recognised if the distinctiveness of Bourdieu’s position is to be fully brought out.

First, Bourdieu [1973; 1986] at various points observes that the transmission of cultural capital shows not only similarities to, but also significant differences from, the transmission of economic capital. The main similarity is that in both cases alike the transmission operates – as a mechanism of social reproduction – primarily within and through the family. However, while the transmission of economic capital can be effected more or less instantaneously, as, say, by gifts or bequests, the transmission of cultural capital takes place over a relatively lengthy period – through what, in the language of mainstream sociology, would be called processes of socialisation. Further, though, while in both cases social reproduction is in general sustained, it would seem that, for Bourdieu, the transmission of cultural capital is, even if slower, yet more secure and irreversible than the transmission of economic capital. And crucial to this position is then another of Bourdieu’s “signature concepts,” that of the *habitus*: that is, the system of socially constituted dispositions that the individual acquires, most effectively in early life, and that determines his or her entire orientation to the world and modes of conduct within it [Bourdieu 1990, 66-79].

The transmission of cultural capital, in its embodied expression, is a major part of the formation of the *habitus*. And, for Bourdieu, this would appear to be a generally more certain and predictable process than that of socialisation as conventionally understood and also one that is realised yet more exclusively within a family, and thus a social class, context.³ Typically, the *habitus* is formed in its essentials by what Bourdieu calls “domestic” influences, and is then further developed only through the individual’s own subsequent experience of “class conditions.” It remains profoundly

³ As Jenkins [2002, 109] notes, Bourdieu “appears to go to enormous lengths” to avoid speaking of socialisation.

resistant to other influences. In particular – and of chief importance for present purposes – the school and other educational institutions are seen as having only very limited potential in this regard. Bourdieu emphasises that the *habitus* acquired within their families by children of dominant classes is then underwritten, as it were, in the course of their education; but only in quite exceptional cases would he allow for the possibility of schools serving to radically redress or “make over” *other* forms of *habitus* that children may bring to them. That is to say, there is little place in Bourdieu’s approach for mainstream sociology’s concept of “re-socialisation,” and certainly not as this might occur through the agency of the educational system.⁴

The second point to be recognised is one that carries particular significance in combination with the first. It is that the content of cultural capital is regarded by Bourdieu as being in an important sense *arbitrary*. That is to say, Bourdieu refuses to accept that particular forms of culture can, to quote Jenkins [2002, 105; cf. Bourdieu and Passeron 1977, 5-13 esp.], “be deduced or derived from any notions of appropriateness or relative value.” Thus, the culture that dominant classes uphold and that in turn directs and informs what is actually taught in schools and colleges cannot claim any intrinsic superiority, nor yet is it open to any more pragmatic validation in terms of the demands that modern societies typically impose upon their members: for example, as regards the knowledge and skills that they have to possess in order to engage in productive work or effective citizenship. Rather, what is taught, as well as how it is taught, has to be understood as being always determined by the interests of dominant classes, and indeed as being so conceived that what counts as cultural capital is what will best ensure the reproduction over time of the prevailing unequal distribution of such capital and thus of social power and privilege more generally [cf. Bourdieu 1973, 80-2; and for critical comment Kingston 2001].

It is especially important to recognise here that – again in contrast to most mainstream sociologists of education – Bourdieu would reject any attempt to *differentiate* between those aspects of culture in the teaching of which class or other socially conditioned influences might readily be present, such as, say, the literary canon or

⁴ Bourdieu derives the concept of *habitus* from Aquinas (via, it seems, Panofsky [1967]). But, as Boudon [2003, 142-143] has pointed out, he in effect elides the important distinction that Aquinas makes between the *habitus corporis* and the *habitus animae* – the former but *not* the latter being outside the individual’s will and control. (To take a present-day example, one cannot decide to unlearn to ride a bicycle.) In consequence, the *habitus*, in Bourdieu’s conception of it, appears both exigent and unchangeable to an excessive degree. To quote Boudon: “Elle a pour effet de naturaliser l’individu, de le traiter comme un objet soumis à des forces qui lui seraient extérieures. Elle permet de faire de la culture une seconde nature; de voir l’individu comme le jouet passif de cette seconde nature; de transformer le sujet en objet et par suite de le rendre accessible au scalpel.” See also van den Berg [1998, 212-20].

national history, and those likely to be more resistant to such influences, such as linguistic, mathematical or scientific knowledge and skills.⁵ For Bourdieu, “pedagogic action” is *in general* an expression – indeed, in modern societies perhaps the prime expression – of “symbolic violence,” undertaken in the interests of social reproduction. To suppose otherwise is simply to fall victim to the legitimator power that is exerted by the idea, promoted by dominant classes, that educational systems function so as to develop individual talent and at the same time to serve the interests of society at large [cf. Bourdieu 1974, 32].

In sum, one could say that even if the transmission of cultural capital via the formation of the *habitus* of members of different classes were not so secure and permanent a process as Bourdieu supposes, the educational system would still not operate in any way as an engine of social transformation. It would remain an essentially conservative force, directed towards creating continuity rather than variation in the social positions of families across generations. For Bourdieu, social reproduction is, in effect, doubly guaranteed.

The Failure of the Theory of Social Reproduction

I have suggested that, from one – restricted – viewpoint, Bourdieu’s account of the role of cultural capital in maintaining class inequalities in educational attainment might be seen as a rather typical expression of the educational sociology of the 1960s. In this perspective, Bourdieu’s contribution does not appear as highly original but could be regarded as sound or, at all events, as not obviously mistaken. If, however, Bourdieu’s explanation of educational inequalities is understood – as indeed it should be understood – as forming an integral part his larger theory of social reproduction, it can surely claim originality. But, one must then ask: is it also sound? And just as surely, I would argue, it is not. It fails because the theory of social reproduction itself fails, and quite demonstrably so.

To hold, as Bourdieu in effect does, that the development and functioning of modern educational systems essentially confirm and stabilise the processes through which individuals and families maintain their social positions over time lacks *prima facie* plausibility. That such a claim can be made does indeed raise serious questions about the theoretical adequacy of both Bourdieu’s macro- and micro-sociology: for example, in the former case, as regards the very shadowy role accorded to the state

⁵ For example, one of the main critical emphases in Jackson and Marsden [1963] is on the need for a greater distinction to be made in secondary school teaching between what amounts to little more than middle-class convention or prejudice and “the culture that really matters.”

or, in the latter, as regards the grossly "over-socialised" view of the individual that the concept of *habitus* implies. However, for present purposes at least, it is sufficient to concentrate on empirical issues.

One of the earliest and most compelling statements of the factual case against Bourdieu was that made by Halsey, Heath and Ridge [1980, chs. 4 and 8 esp.] on the basis of British data – although data that would prove to be generally replicable from other advanced societies [cf. Shavit and Blossfeld 1993]. What Halsey and his colleagues showed was that in the course of the Twentieth-century expansion of secondary education in Britain, substantial and predominantly upward educational mobility, did in fact occur between generations. Thus, as of the early 1970s, over two-thirds of the individuals surveyed who had attended a selective secondary school were "first-generation" – i.e. their parents had not received any education at this level; and while children of working-class background were under-represented in this group, they were far from being excluded. Moreover, of these first-generation children, two-thirds had been successful in achieving some form of secondary educational qualification – a proportion only slightly smaller than that found among pupils who were *not* first-generation.⁶

In two respects, then, Bourdieu's position is powerfully controverted by these simple and straightforward findings. To begin with, they demonstrate that, as Halsey *et al.* [1980, 77] put it, schools

(...) were doing far more than "reproducing" cultural capital; they were creating it, too (...) They were not merely maintaining a "cycle of privilege" in which cultural capital is acquired by those from educated homes. They were at least offering an opportunity to acquire cultural capital to those homes that had not secured it in the past.

And, at the same time, the findings reported undermine the claim, crucial for Bourdieu [1973, 80], that (in his own prose)

An implicit pedagogic action, requiring initial familiarity with the dominant culture (...) offers information and training which can be received and acquired *only* [my emphasis] by subjects endowed with the system of predispositions that is the condition for the success of the transmission and inculcation of the culture.

Or, one could say, the idea that the *habitus*, as initially formed by family and class, may be subject to confirmation by the school but not, other than quite exceptionally, to any kind of *reconstitution* is directly called into question.

⁶ The data and analyses presented by Halsey *et al.* [1980] are in fact limited to England and Wales, and to males. But various subsequent investigations show, not surprisingly, that essentially the same conclusions as theirs can be drawn for Scotland and for females.

Furthermore, it is today possible to see that essentially the same processes of intergenerational change that were earlier associated with the expansion of secondary education are being repeated, and, if anything, in an accentuated form, with the expansion of the tertiary sector [cf. Schofer and Meyer 2005; Shavit, Arum and Gamoran forth.]. Upward educational mobility is again being extensively promoted, now to university level. And it thus becomes yet more evident than before that the idea of the family as the only, or even the main, locus of the transmission of cultural capital is, in the modern world at least, quite unsustainable.

It is important at this point to ensure clarity on two crucial issues. First, to thus set the basic evidence of educational expansion and its consequences in opposition to Bourdieu's theory of social reproduction in not to underwrite versions of "modernisation" theory according to which this expansion is a key factor in the creation of a progressively more egalitarian and "open" form of society. Indeed, the same authors who have documented processes of educational expansion have typically emphasised that the new educational opportunities that were created have been taken up to much the same degree by children of all social backgrounds alike, the children of dominant classes included. Thus, even though – contrary to the theory of social reproduction – steadily increasing numbers of children from more disadvantaged backgrounds have reached ever higher levels of educational attainment, the actual extent and significance of any narrowing in the *relative* chances of such attainment, according to class origins, remain much debated issues.⁷

However, the second point to be made is that it is then scarcely possible to rescue Bourdieu's theory of social reproduction by claiming that it is in fact to be understood in "relative" terms – i.e. that the reproduction to which it refers is no more than the reproduction over time of the relative probabilities with which children of differing class origins achieve certain levels of educational success and, further, certain levels of employment and associated positions within the class structure.

It is actually in one of the few places in his earlier work where Bourdieu does refer to relative rates of educational attainment that his overriding concern with ab-

⁷ My own position on the role of educational expansion in reducing class differentials in attainment and thus helping to create greater social fluidity is set out in elsewhere [Goldthorpe 2006, vol. 2, chs. 11 and 16 esp.]. However, one point may here be reiterated. In a Bourdieusien world in which the children of subordinate classes are alienated from the educational system and deprived of all hope or aspiration for success within it, the expansion of the system would then be disproportionately exploited by children of dominant classes, and class differentials in attainment would *widen*. But, whatever disagreements may exist on whether or how far such differentials have narrowed, no evidence of a sustained shift in the *opposite* direction has been produced for any modern society: i.e. working-class and other children from less advantaged backgrounds have in fact taken up new educational opportunities *at least at the same rate* as children from more advantaged backgrounds.

solute rates is best brought out. In an Appendix to Bourdieu and Passeron [1977], entitled "The Changing Structure of Higher Education Opportunities: Redistribution or Translation?," it is observed that, in the context of university expansion in France between 1962 and 1964, the chances of children of working-class origin entering university did indeed rise, and rather more than those of the children of senior executives. But this finding is at once dismissed with the, quite correct, observation that even a doubling of the initial very low (1.5 per cent) rate of entry for working-class children still implies an almost negligible change – i.e. in absolute terms. And the further argument is then developed that these children's chances of gaining access to university remain far below the objective "threshold" at which a significant upturn in their perceived chances of success, and hence in their aspirations, might be created. In other words, the aim is clearly to show that, even with educational expansion, the dynamics of the transmission of cultural capital mean that children of working-class (and likewise of peasant) background remain overwhelmingly *excluded from* higher education and are in fact resigned to this situation – despite, the authors add, the occasional experience of "the 'wonderboy', miraculously saved by the School" [*ibidem*, 227]. Moreover, it is in turn evident that Bourdieu [e.g. 1973, 71 and 86] would see upward class mobility from such disadvantaged origins, at least as mediated via education, as being also quite exceptional and in effect limited to specially selected cases that serve a primarily legitimatory purpose.

Now as of the early 1960s, such a position could still, conceivably, be defended, at all events in the French case. However, what has further to be noted is the very limited extent to which Bourdieu subsequently modified his position as the expansion of educational provision in France, as elsewhere, proceeded apace. In *Distinction* Bourdieu [1984, ch. 2; cf. also 1979] does recognise the evident facts of educational expansion at the secondary level – of what he calls the "schooling boom" – and in turn the growing importance of "the scholastic mode of reproduction" which results in certain fractions of the dominant class pursuing strategies of "reconversion" of economic into cultural capital as the best means of securing their children's futures. But at the same time Bourdieu's chief concern is clearly to maintain that as regards social reproduction far less has in fact changed than might on a superficial view be supposed. For example, as the provision of secondary education has been expanded, it has, he argues, been *re-stratified*; and as formal qualifications have become more widely distributed, they have been correspondingly devalued. Moreover, the returns to such qualifications are in any event unequal in that children from families with greater economic and social capital are far better able to exploit them. And, consequently, increasing upward mobility, especially as achieved via education, is more apparent than real.

Indeed, Bourdieu concludes [see esp. Bourdieu 1984, 142-144 and 154-156] that “first generation” participants in secondary education have been a “cheated” generation, to a large extent fobbed off with “worthless paper.” It is in fact when subordinate classes, rather than being simply debarred, are allowed access to secondary education, under the ideology of *l'école libératrice*, that the reality of *l'école conservatrice* is most fully revealed. For even if more gradually and subtly than before – through various means of elimination, retardation and diversion into inferior options within the secondary system – the “great mass” of children from outside the dominant class are still excluded from the education that sustains the reproduction of this class.

There is thus little basis here for suggesting a new “relativised” understanding of Bourdieu’s theory of social reproduction. Bourdieu in effect seizes upon a number of social processes that could well be of importance in maintaining class differentials in educational attainment, even under conditions of rapid expansion, but then (mis)interprets these as confirming the continuing validity of his theory in essentially its original form, even at a time when it was in fact being manifestly undermined. For example, already among French children born into the working class in the late 1960s and early 1970s not just *Wunderkinder* but almost two-fifths of those of skilled workers and a quarter of those of unskilled workers did succeed in gaining the *baccalauréat* or equivalent or some higher qualification [Thélot and Vallet 2000, Table 1]; and despite whatever devaluation of these qualifications might have occurred, this change was clearly linked to rising rates of upward mobility into professional and managerial positions [cf. Vallet 2004, Table 5.A2 esp.].

Cultural Capital: Bourdieu Domesticated and Wild

The situation has then come about that in present-day discussion of educational, and wider, social inequalities, the concept of cultural capital is applied in the context of two, quite different understandings of Bourdieu’s work. These can, I think, be appropriately labelled as Bourdieu “domesticated” and Bourdieu “wild”. Following the domesticated understanding, Bourdieu is treated as a sociologist contributing to “normal science” – or, one might say, as a fully paid-up member of ISA Research Committee 28, Social Stratification and Mobility – whose work is open, like that of all others involved, to qualification, refinement, development, etc.⁸ Following the wild, that is, more authentic understanding, Bourdieu is seen as aiming, through his theory of social reproduction, to forge a quite new conceptual and theoretical approach to

⁸ To the best of my knowledge – and in no way surprisingly – Bourdieu was never a member of RC 28 nor attended any of its meetings.

the study of social inequality and hierarchy, and one that has then to be judged, at paradigm level, as being either a major social scientific advance or, as here, a failure. What I seek in conclusion to show is that because this situation has not in general been adequately recognised, various problems and no little confusion have arisen and persist.

In the domesticated understanding of Bourdieu, the concept of cultural capital is in effect prised away from the central role that it plays in his theory of social reproduction. Although it is rarely, if ever, explicitly argued by those following this understanding that the theory is intended to apply in only “relative” terms, the concept of cultural capital is treated *as if* this were the case. That is to say, it is taken to be of potential value in the explanation of the class differentials in educational attainment that remain even as levels of attainment rise sharply among children of all class backgrounds alike. However, with such usage, quite serious, if unappreciated, divergences from the *ur*-concept regularly arise, and often lead to the true significance of the research findings that are reported being misconstrued, at least so far as the evaluation of Bourdieu’s work is concerned.

As prime illustrations of this point, one may take, first, attempts, stemming mainly from the work of DiMaggio [1982; and see also 2001], to investigate the relative importance of cultural capital as against “measured ability” in determining children’s educational performance; and, second, attempts such as those initiated chiefly by Paul De Graaf [1986; De Graaf, De Graaf and Kraaykamp 2000; and see also Sullivan 2001] to distinguish among different kinds of cultural capital and their effects. I would see these two lines of research as having produced many results of major interest. But what has at the same time to be noted is that they do often involve quite radical misconceptions of Bourdieu’s position, and that in turn the results presented often have a proper relation to Bourdieu’s work significantly different to what the researchers themselves would suppose.

As Lareau and Weininger [2003] have pointed out, to seek, in the manner of DiMaggio, to distinguish between students’ cultural capital and their ability – i.e. between their supposed status-giving participation in “high” culture and their scores on various academic tests – as determinants of their achieved school grades is quite alien to Bourdieu’s entire approach; and, in particular, when it is only the former that is seen as involving essentially arbitrary evaluation [DiMaggio 1982, 189; 2001, 544]. As earlier indicated, Bourdieu would in fact extend the idea of the “cultural arbitrary” to all forms of recognised knowledge, skill and competency, in that considerations of status dominance, and its preservation, necessarily enter into their social construction and legitimation. After citing several key passages from Bourdieu bearing on this point, Lareau and Weininger [2003, 582] aptly remark: “They reveal how far he

stands from the interpretation that animates much of the English-language literature. Effects of ‘status’ for Bourdieu are not distinct from those of ‘skill’ (or by extension, ‘ability’). Cultural capital amounts to an irreducible amalgamation of the two.”⁹

Consequently, DiMaggio’s research would be far better seen not as testing, and in some part supporting, Bourdieu’s arguments on the role of cultural capital in social reproduction, but rather as starting out from a quite anti-Bourdiesien insistence on the limits of the “cultural arbitrary,” and in turn from a rejection of the associated (and truly wild) claim that all pedagogy amounts to “symbolic violence” – a claim to which in fact DiMaggio never refers. In this context, the finding DiMaggio reports that students’ cultural capital is clearly less important, relative to ability, in technical than in non-technical subjects would then take on a much larger significance than that he gives to it, as also would his further finding that students’ cultural capital is in any event only rather weakly linked to parental education.¹⁰

The concern of de Graaf and others to separate out the effects of different forms of cultural capital on children’s academic performance – or more generally, one might say, the effects of values from those of resources – could likewise be regarded as scarcely compatible with the concept of cultural capital as originally formulated by Bourdieu. And this becomes especially clear when a distinction is suggested between “educational affinity” effects and “educational skills” effects – with the former being seen as deriving more from family participation in *beaux arts* and the latter more from family reading behaviour [De Graaf, De Graaf and Kraaykamp 2000]. Essentially the same observations as were made in regard to DiMaggio’s (mis)understanding of Bourdieu would again apply.

The main finding that does then emerge from this line of research is that family reading behaviour is more important for children’s performance than *beaux arts* participation *and* less closely tied to the family’s socioeconomic position. This result, it is

⁹ Lareau and Weininger’s paper is the only previous attempt I have found to bring out in some detail the extent to which the application of the concept of cultural capital in research published in English-language journals entails serious but apparently unrecognised deviations from the concept as originally formulated by Bourdieu. What Lareau and Weininger call “the dominant approach” to the understanding of Bourdieu is more or less equivalent to my “domesticated” understanding.

¹⁰ DiMaggio does in fact end up by suggesting that his results lend more support to a “cultural mobility” than to a “cultural reproduction” model – i.e. cultural capital facilitates the academic success of any student who has it, and is not the exclusive resource of students from a particular social background. But, as Kingston [2001, 92] points out, if the cultural mobility models holds, then Bourdieu’s argument is severely undermined. The fact that nonelite students can benefit from this capital directly counters Bourdieu’s claim that its acquisition is deeply embedded in elite families’ socialization patterns.

true, leads to some criticism of Bourdieu that almost dares to be radical.¹¹ However, if Bourdieu had from the first been understood in wild – and more authentic – rather than in domesticated terms, then a critique of his work of a more fundamental and more illuminating kind would have been possible. Quite basic data on educational expansion and consequent educational mobility could first have sufficed to show, in the manner of Halsey *et al.*, that Bourdieu's view of the transmission of cultural capital as a key process in social reproduction is simply wrong. And the more detailed findings of the research, as noted above, could then have been taken as helping to explain just *why* it is wrong.¹² That is, because differing class conditions do not give rise to such distinctive and abiding forms of *habitus* as Bourdieu would suppose; because even within more disadvantaged classes, with little access to high culture, values favouring education may still prevail and perhaps some relevant cultural resources exist; and because, therefore, schools and other educational institutions can function as important agencies of re-socialisation – that is, can not only underwrite but also in various respects *complement, compensate for or indeed counter* family influences in the creation and transmission of "cultural capital", and not just in the case of *Wunderkinder* but in fact on a mass scale.

In the case of sociologists who apply the concept of cultural capital within a domesticated understanding of Bourdieu, the problem is then one of a failure to appreciate just how radical – or extreme – are the claims that Bourdieu is in fact prepared to make in seeking to create his new paradigm, and in turn just how far their research findings are at odds with these claims. However, if one turns to the case of those sociologists who would wish to see "cultural capital" retained with a meaning and function close to that found in Bourdieu wild, a quite different problem is apparent: that is, that of how the concept is to be used in research at all, given the loss of credibility of the theory in which it is embedded.

In this respect ample illustration is provided by a recent special number of the *British Journal of Sociology* devoted to the theme of "The Concept of Cultural

¹¹ After first saying no more than that their results "do not particularly support Bourdieu's cultural reproduction theory", De Graaf *et al.* [2000, 106 and 108] are eventually led to conclude that the fact that parents of modest status and educational level can compensate by offering their children a favourable reading climate and associated skills is in "striking" contrast with Bourdieu's position which "implies that children from high status backgrounds do so well at school because their parents are at home in the cultural system."

¹² That an initial step of the kind suggested was not taken may be because in earlier research [Ganzeboom, De Graaf and Robert 1990, 83] a misconception occurs as regards the basis of the critique that Halsey *et al.*, make of Bourdieu's theory of social reproduction. What Halsey *et al.* set in opposition to this theory is *not*, as these authors suppose, their finding of little change in class differentials in educational attainment but, rather, as earlier noted, their finding of substantial, and predominantly upward, intergenerational educational mobility.

Capital and Social Inequality”. In their editorial introduction, Savage and Bennett [2005, 1] refer to the “distant relationship between the sociology of stratification and class practised in the UK and USA and the tradition of social and cultural analysis associated with Bourdieu.” Some neglect would seem here implied of the now quite extensive research carried out following the domesticated understanding of Bourdieu, to which I have referred; but this is attributable, perhaps, to the authors’ concern to adhere to Bourdieu wild. At all events, it is notable that Savage and Bennett charge critics of Bourdieu from the side of stratification research of having accepted “a reading of his concept of cultural capital which did not place it within his wider theoretical framework” [*ibidem*, 2].

This position is then maintained in a further contribution to the number by Savage, Warde and Devine in which the authors argue that the concept of cultural capital has advantages over that of cultural resources (as used, for example, in my own work) on the grounds that, while the latter is a merely descriptive or “commonsensical” concept, the former has a clear theoretical rationale as spelled out by Bourdieu in his general treatment of the forms of capital.¹³ However, unresolved difficulties arise in the attempt to develop this argument.

It is not in fact easy to grasp just what are the specific advantages that Savage *et al.* [2005, 5-6] would see as being provided by the concept of cultural capital (readers may consult the relevant paragraphs), and no actual research illustrations are provided. What chiefly emerges is that these authors would wish to emphasise how the generalisation of the idea of capital removes the privilege given in other approaches to purely economic factors, and allows economic, cultural and social power and advantage to be treated on an equal and integrated basis: for example, all forms of capital can be considered in terms of the returns they provide and of the possibilities they offer for accumulation and convertibility.

However, what has then to be noted is a curious omission: Savage *et al.* say virtually nothing about the further shared feature of forms of capital identified by Bourdieu, that is, transmissibility. And it is of course, as I have earlier sought to bring out, precisely the – supposed – mode of transmissibility of cultural capital that gives it its crucial role within Bourdieu’s theory of social reproduction. Cultural capital is seen as being primarily generated and transmitted within families, and in turn there-

¹³ What is not pointed out is that I would wish to use the concept of cultural resources along with that of cultural values, and that I have elsewhere argued [Goldthorpe 2000/2006, chs. 11 and 13] that a failure to make this distinction – that the concept of cultural capital elides – flaws criticism put forward by Devine [1998] of a rational action approach to explaining class differentials in educational attainment: in brief, because while such an approach gives little weight to class differences in values regarding education, it readily accommodates class differences in the cultural – and other – resources necessary to the realisation of values that are largely shared.

fore within classes, via the formation of the *habitus* of their members. In this way, dominant classes achieve and sustain an effective intergenerational monopolisation of cultural capital which today is perhaps of more general importance for social reproduction even than the control that they exercise over economic capital. But, as I have also sought to show, it is in just this regard that Bourdieu's theory has been most decisively undermined by empirical evidence, from the work of Halsey *et al.* onwards. It has become quite manifest that in modern societies the family is *not* the only locus of either the creation or transmission of cultural capital. Contrary to Bourdieu's claims, educational institutions also can, and do, play a major role in this regard, and one that has some significant degree of independence from the influences of family and class. And, one may add, it is in this regard that the analogy with economic capital, which tends not to be provided free or below cost by the state or other agencies, rather obviously breaks down.

The question that must then arise, so far as Savage and his associates are concerned, is that of whether or how far they would regard Bourdieu's theory of social reproduction – to which, as they insist, the concept of cultural capital must be tied – as still having validity. But to this question no clear answer is forthcoming. Rather, one may note a good deal of uncertainty if not equivocation.

Thus, Savage and Bennett [2005, 2] at one point give the impression that they might wish to defend the theory: that is, by arguing that its critique by Halsey and his colleagues is unsound in that in their research they did not supplement information on parental education with information on cultural taste, practice and knowledge. But this objection has little force. For even if it were the case that those children who were first-generation acquirers of secondary qualifications did tend to come from families with some cultural resources on which schools could build, this would still be in contradiction with Bourdieu's ideas of the monopolisation of cultural capital by dominant classes, and especially so given the extent to which these children were also of working-class origin and then typically achieved upward class as well as educational mobility.¹⁴

Indeed, it is unclear if such a defence is convincing even to its proponents. For in Savage, Warde and Devine [2005, 11; and cf. also Bennett 2005] one finds acknowledgement that a serious difficulty in Bourdieu is "a kind of latent functionalism" following from which "the process of reproduction seemingly allows the endless

¹⁴ More damaging to Halsey *et al.* would have been support for the hypothesis, suggested by Jackson and Marsden [1963], that many children of manual wage-workers who succeed in their secondary education are in fact of "sunken middle-class" background – i.e. the children of downwardly mobile parents. Halsey *et al.* give careful consideration to this hypothesis but find no evidence consistent with it.

reproduction of power,” with any apparent change being treated as no more than illusory. To which one can only respond that, rather than this being simply a difficulty in Bourdieu, it is of course what his theory of social reproduction is all about – and what has for long been the focus of criticism on theoretical as well as an empirical grounds [see e.g. Elster 1983, 104-106; Boudon 1989, 155-158].

At this point, however, Savage *et al.* muddy the waters with the suggestion that in its insistence that dominant classes “always win,” Bourdieu’s theory has similarities with other theories, and notably my own [Goldthorpe 2000/2006, vol. 2], that are concerned with the degree of temporal stability of class differentials in educational attainment and of endogenous class mobility regimes. But this is simply an undercover attempt to rescue Bourdieu in the way I earlier referred to by implying that his theory of social reproduction has be understood in “relative” terms – an interpretation that, as I have earlier shown, can find little textual support. The social regularities that I seek to explain, though indeed indicative of persisting class inequalities, are not those of social reproduction à la Bourdieu. Rather, they are entirely compatible with – *and do in fact coexist with* – a growing influx of working-class children into higher levels of education and long periods of rising rates of upward educational and class mobility.¹⁵

In sum, it remains for Savage and his associates, and for others who would believe that the concept of cultural capital has a valuable and distinctive part to play in research in social stratification, to provide a far clearer account than we so far have of just how much of the now rather embarrassing theoretical baggage that comes with this concept they would want to retain and how much to jettison; and further of how they would then see the concept as differing from the “commonsensical” one of cultural resources, especially when complemented by, but kept separate from, that of cultural values. And it would of course also be helpful if such an account could

¹⁵ A failure to appreciate – or a determination to obscure – this fundamental point runs through an entire book by one of the authors in question who, also tries the alternative tack of maintaining that Bourdieu and I have similar problems in our failure to recognise “the significant levels of absolute mobility, including long-range upward mobility, enjoyed (...) by many” [Devine 2004, 186]. I can only wonder what I may have been writing about for a quarter of a century, starting with the first substantive chapter of my first book on mobility [Goldthorpe 1980/1987, ch. 2].

include actual examples of the concept at work in explanations of social regularities of a well-established kind.¹⁶

Conclusions

My main aim in this paper has been to draw attention to problems associated with the concept of cultural capital that arise from its application in the context of two different understandings of the work of Bourdieu in course of which the concept was developed. Following the understanding that I have labelled as Bourdieu domesticated, his work is in effect treated as a contribution, deserving of serious consideration, within a long-standing paradigm of research into the sources of social inequalities in educational attainment. Following what I have labelled as Bourdieu wild, it is seen – far more appropriately – as an attempt to create a quite new paradigm for the study of social inequality and social hierarchy in general. It is further the case, I have argued, that while in its domesticated understanding Bourdieu's work might be regarded as tolerably sound, at least for its time, even if not very original, in its wild understanding it is certainly original but as regards its centrepiece, the theory of social reproduction, must by now be adjudged as quite unsound. Consequently, problems arise in two ways. On the one hand, sociologists accepting Bourdieu domesticated, who have in fact made most research use of the concept of cultural capital, have adapted it to their purposes in ways that are clearly not compatible with Bourdieu's general theoretical position and have often then misinterpreted their own findings: for example, as lending at least some qualified support for Bourdieu's position when they in fact go directly contrary to it. On the other hand, sociologists wishing to adhere to Bourdieu wild, and who have been critical of those who have detached the concept of cultural capital from its proper theoretical setting, have themselves found difficulty in showing just how the *ur*-concept can be kept fit for research purposes, given the failure – of which they show some uncomfortable recognition – of the theory that it directly serves.

¹⁶ Lareau and Weininger [2003] also make proposals for the further research use of the concept of cultural capital in what they would regard as something close to its original form: specifically, in the analysis of the knowledge, skills and competencies that parents and students are able to deploy in their interactions with teachers and administrators as they seek to comply with institutionalised standards of evaluation. This approach may well have potential, and Lareau and Weininger do provide some illustrative ethnographic data. But while it is no doubt true that knowledge etc. in the sense in question is intergenerationally transmitted within families, I would again see the key question as being that of how far this is the *exclusive* mode of transmission; and to the extent that it is not, then Bourdieusien social reproduction – as distinct from the creation of relative class advantages and disadvantages – is unlikely to be the consequence.

In the interests of achieving the clarity that is needed for a resolution of these problems, I would make a modest proposal on the following lines. Those researchers who are concerned with cultural influences on children's educational attainment, and on persisting class differentials in such attainment, but who would not accept Bourdieu's theory of social reproduction, should likewise not accept the concept of cultural capital. They should abandon it in favour a theoretically more neutral and more limited one, such as that of cultural resources. (Some of the authors to whom I earlier referred as working in the context of Bourdieu domesticated do in fact use both concepts as, apparently, equivalents.) It will thus be possible for these researchers to recognise, without confusing themselves or others, distinctions that the concept of cultural capital would preclude: for example, between cultural resources and cultural values, between cultural resources and academic ability, or between different kinds of cultural resources that need not be closely correlated and that may enhance children's educational performance in quite differing ways. And in turn, then, the implications for processes of the intergenerational cultural transmission that would follow from Bourdeusien notions of the *habitus*, of the cultural arbitrary and of pedagogic action as symbolic violence, rather than being seemingly underwritten, could be made more closely subject to empirical scrutiny – and, I would expect, substantial rejection.

Correspondingly, the concept of cultural capital would be left as specific to Bourdieu wild or, that is, as exclusive to those sociologists who are still able to persuade themselves that Bourdieu's theory of social reproduction can be upheld. In this case, my expectation would be that its uses in research, as opposed to its display in merely programmatic statements, will prove extremely limited – short of the kind of radical revision of the theory that would then deprive the concept, and indeed the whole apparatus of “forms of capital,” of its very purpose.

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“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.

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