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Comment on John Goldthorpe others/4. "Cultural Capital" or "Cultural Resources"?

(doi: 10.2383/26579)

Sociologica (ISSN 1971-8853)

Fascicolo 1, maggio-giugno 2008

Ente di afferenza:

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Comment on John Goldthorpe & others/4 “Cultural Capital” or “Cultural Resources”?

by Marcos G. Breuer

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John H. Goldthorpe’s paper which appeared in the second number of *Sociologica* [Goldthorpe 2007] and the subsequent critical comments by Paul De Graaf [2007], Paul DiMaggio [2007], and Mike Savage, Alan Warde, and Fiona Devine [2007] encourage the reader to rethink some central aspects of the notion of “cultural capital” developed by Pierre Bourdieu. At the same time, the discussion prompts reflection about some wider-ranging points concerning the possibility of constructing general sociological theories or systems about contemporary society. In these pages, I would like to strike a brief balance concerning that discussion, pointing out the elements that in my opinion deserve particular consideration.

A reader unfamiliar to this set of problems might react as follows after reading the debate which concerns us: “Within a scientific discipline like sociology, she may say, a concept is an useful instrument for the construction of scientific theories whose aim is to explain or, at least, to further understanding of social action and observed social regularities. Consequently, the discussion should remain within the frame of this question: Is the concept of cultural capital useful and relevant to the construction of a theory that explains patterns of social stratification and mobility in advanced societies?” This approach, external and somewhat naïve, nevertheless suggests that in the debate, at least to a certain extent, the supporting (or rejection) of Bourdieu’s concept of cultural capital is motivated by “illegitimate” reasons – i.e., because the social scientist embraces an individualistic model or, on the contrary, a conflict-based model as the general frame for sociological research.

Having made that general remark, I would like now to go on to the specific arguments that are presented in the debate. It is well known that all the participants

in the discussion – as well as Bourdieu – have a large and significant body of work in empirical research on education and social mobility. While Goldthorpe insists on the lack of pertinence of the concept of cultural capital and the need to replace it through other concepts such as “cultural resources” and “cultural values” (which, by the way, he does not explain in neither of his two papers), DiMaggio and the other authors, on the contrary, state that the concept of cultural capital has been central to their research, even when they had to redefine it to various degrees. The concept of cultural capital presented in Bourdieu’s studies is, according to Goldthorpe’s critics, capable of a more precise definition (“operationalization”) that makes possible its employment in different types of empirical research projects. In my opinion, the critical observations that Goldthorpe presents concerning the concept – many of them clearly sound – do not invalidate *in toto* Bourdieu’s concept of cultural capital. Instead, they merely point out the need to redefine it, making it more precise and liberating it from some of its more “ideological” connotations. This is in part the aim of authors like Sullivan [2001]. In other words, I consider – along with Goldthorpe’s critics – that the concept of capital cultural is a useful and relevant notion for sociology, even if, *firstly*, it requires a more precise analysis and, *secondly*, the 1970 study of Bourdieu and Passeron [1990] should be revised or even to some degree discarded because of its lack of precision and the inaccuracy of some of its main assertions.

Let me list the critical points participants in the debate have made as to Bourdieu’s theory of social reproduction – a theory to be found in one of its first formulations in *Reproduction*. *First*, during the last half of the Twentieth century, in western societies, we see – contrary to what *Reproduction* suggests – significant educational mobility: children [and especially the daughters! See Martínez García 2007] of workers and peasants were able to attend – and often successfully complete – primary school, high school and, in some cases, even higher education. (Bear in mind, nevertheless, that educational mobility does not always bring about social mobility, in part because of the general process of devaluation of educational qualifications. On the other hand, not every change in social structure due to generalized social upward mobility is caused by an increase in educational mobility: To a significant extent, the improvement in the situation of the working class and the increase of the service class in countries like France and England is the result of a transfer of industrial production to developing countries.) *Second*, the individual is not narrowly determined by the set of cognitive, volitional and emotional dispositions acquired mainly during the first years of life – as it is sometimes suggested by the concept of *habitus*. School consequently can carry out a sort of “re-socialization” of the individual. (Even though I detect a “deterministic” and even somewhat “fatalistic” element in some passages of Bourdieu’s work, it is also true that, seen from the global point of view which Bour-

dieu adopts, our societies continue to be strongly unequal and rigid, despite some changes in structure due to relative educational mobility, among other things).

On the other hand, it is surprising that neither of the participants in the debate that concerns us here makes even a single reference to the practical implications of the concept of cultural capital – or any preferred substitute. The view that the first years in the development of the individual inside the family are decisive for later educational success, or the assumption that schools can re-socialize children by furnishing competences and dispositions that may not have been acquired in the family, or finally, the extent to which educational success or failure influences the future adult's chances to change or to remain within the group to which her parents belonged –, all these are key points that prompt the evaluation of current school system and of the measures taken in the last decades to reform it. The professionalization of sociology should not induce us to lose sight of its undeniable socio-political “practical” dimension – one of the aspects upon which Bourdieu rightly insists.

I would like to close this comment making a general observation on the basis of the distinction between the “domesticated” and the “wild” Bourdieu that Goldthorpe introduces, while he rejects the first as “uninteresting” and the second as “unsound.” I point out *en passant* that all discussants on this distinction distanced themselves from Goldthorpe's appraisal, either by praising Bourdieu's empirical research on specific topics – in this case, social stratification, – or by stressing the importance of Bourdieu's efforts to create a general social theory of social change. Contrary to Goldthorpe and de Graaf, I do not find it inappropriate that a sociologist purports to create a general theory or approach to interpret the social reality as a whole. This ambition is found also in the natural sciences: the search of far-reaching models that integrate partial theories. The risk, as Goldthorpe points out, is clear: the larger the models are, the less direct is the linkage with the empirical material and the more vulnerable to the influence of ideological elements within the scientist's worldview. But the lack of a general theory is also counterproductive. Without such a theory, sociology would become a grab bag of partial data and observations of different types lying haphazardly next to each another.

On the other hand, regardless of all weaknesses in the concept of cultural capital and the theory of social reproduction elaborated by the “domesticated” Bourdieu, there is an aspect that I consider to be fundamental. Bourdieu's work – in the tradition of Max Weber and Norbert Elias – places the dimension of *power* in the middle of the sociological analysis – a dimension that tends to be overlooked or considered only superficially under individualistic approaches. In other words: Despite some weaknesses in Bourdieu's concepts and theories, he has sought to restore to sociology a crucial insight: the fact that the individuals and groups *qua* social agents compete in

different fields and with different strategies in order to control and possess the strategic resources that ensure them differentials of power, and that the structure of society and the subjectivity of individuals are (contingent) products of those “struggles.” Despite the undeniable value of Goldthorpe’s empirical research, I question whether his approach fully does justice to these considerations.

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Comment on John Goldthorpe & others/4 “Cultural Capital” or “Cultural Resources”?

Abstract: In this paper, I try to strike a brief balance concerning the discussion between Goldthorpe and his critics appeared in the second issue of *Sociologica*. After examining the main criticisms presented to Bourdieu’s concept of cultural capital, I maintain that this notion is still a useful device to construct a general theory of social stratification. Surely, the concept – especially in its first formulation in 1970 – lacks precision and is pervaded to a certain extent by ideological biases. Nevertheless, Bourdieu’s theory of social mobility places power as the central key to sociological analysis, and this aspect makes his approach a valuable and fruitful contribution.

Keywords: Goldthorpe, cultural capital, social mobility, sociological theory, power.

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