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Three Cheers for Unoriginality - but Who will be Cheering?. A Comment on Breuer and Lizardo

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Three Cheers for Unoriginality – but Who will be Cheering?

A Comment on Breuer and Lizardo

by John H. Goldthorpe

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In the first footnote to the paper that triggered the present controversy [Goldthorpe 2007a], I remarked:

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...

It is always gratifying to have one's predictions confirmed – and so fully and so promptly – in the way that Lizardo [2008] has achieved. As I anticipated, not even my precautionary resort to other authors' expositions of Bourdieu could serve to stave off the inevitable response. I did, it appears, choose the wrong commentators – “Anglo-Americans” whose work is “highly unreliable and subject to various errors of interpretation” [*ibidem*]. At the same time, I fail to recognise a crucial distinction between “early” and “late” Bourdieu, and do not have a sufficient familiarity with the “long, wordy and complicated books” that follow on from the – presumably – short and terse simplicities of his *juvenilia*.

However, satisfaction at having a pretty good grasp of Bourdieusien “immunisation strategies” soon gives way to the uncomfortable feeling of not knowing wheth-

er to laugh or to cry at their ultimate futility. Contrary to what Lizardo asserts, in my critique of the concept of cultural capital I *did* in fact draw on *Distinction* [Bourdieu 1984] and other of Bourdieu's later works [Bourdieu 1986; Bourdieu 1990] as well as on earlier ones. For example, in the case of Bourdieu on educational expansion and mobility, I refer crucially to two passages from *Distinction* [Goldthorpe 2007a, 11] – emphasising the persisting reality of *l'école conservatrice* as against the ideology of *l'école libératrice*; and these passages I could counterpose to those from the same book that are cited by Lizardo. Moreover, I have little doubt that I could continue in like manner, trading one quotation from Bourdieu against another, throughout the whole of his argument. But to do so would mean being complicit in the naivety Lizardo shows in supposing that any definitive interpretation of Bourdieu can be arrived at by the simple expedient of reporting “what Bourdieu actually said” [Lizardo 2008]. The whole problem is of course – to revert to my footnote – that so much of what Bourdieu said is shot through with ambiguity, if not inconsistency or contradiction. Jenkins, Lareau and Weininger, one may note, use at least as much direct citation of what Bourdieu actually said in presenting their interpretations as does Lizardo. Yet this does not stand in the way of his – quite arbitrary – dismissal of these interpretations as being unreliable and erroneous.

Let me, then, respond to Lizardo in a different way, and one that does in fact lead back to the main points of my initial paper. Let me assume – for the moment and for the purposes of the argument – that Lizardo is essentially correct: that Bourdieu does in his later work, from, say, *Distinction* onwards, shift significantly away from positions that he earlier took up and, further, that, by this stage at least, he disavows any ambition to formulate general theory.

Thus, following this interpretation, Bourdieu comes to accept that schooling can significantly modify the *habitus*, and not just by way of reinforcement but also of “transformation,” so that not only a few *Wunderkinder* but in fact substantial numbers of children of disadvantaged class backgrounds can achieve genuine educational success – as opposed to “worthless paper” – and can benefit from the opportunities it provides. In turn, then, Bourdieu also accepts that “social reproduction,” whether in regard to educational attainment or class position, has to be understood in relative rather than absolute terms; in other words, what is reproduced from generation to generation is not the actual social composition of the cultural elite and dominant class but only the relative statistical probabilities of social mobility or immobility. And finally Bourdieu accepts that the knowledge and skills that are transmitted through the educational system are not merely the arbitrary expression of dominant class culture and that “pedagogic action” is not merely a form of “symbolic violence” aimed at preserving the *status quo*; rather, what is taught and how it is taught can, and in

general do, have some degree of objective value and appropriateness to modern economic and political life.

So what, then, one can now ask, is the upshot of conceding Lizardo's argument in this way – of supposing that, by the time of his later works, Bourdieu had in effect “domesticated” himself, so that he could, say, have participated in ISA RC28 meetings without his views appearing to be anything out of the ordinary?

From my own position, I must in truth admit that I find such an interpretation of Bourdieu – as, in the end, abandoning the quest for originality and for general theory in the interests of empirical “soundness” – a quite implausible one. If what Bourdieu really wanted to say is no more than what Lizardo suggests, then, one may ask, why “the long, wordy and complicated books,” why the dismissive remarks *de haut en bas* about social mobility research [e.g. Bourdieu 1984, 131-133], why the pretentious philosophising, why all the *eumerdification*? Could Bourdieu not have used the relatively simple language – backed up by serious empirical analysis – that one finds in the authors (Meyer, Sobel, Hout, Duncan, Shavit, Blossfeld, even myself) whom Lizardo cites as advancing arguments that, he believes, those of late Bourdieu essentially parallel?

However, for my own part, I can happily take the view that, if Lizardo wants it that way, then so be it: for Bourdieu wild and domesticated substitute Bourdieu early and late. But the further question does of course arise of where Lizardo's interpretation leaves other Bourdieusiens and in particular those – I would guess, the majority – who see the real value of his work as lying in its originality and its commitment to theoretical unity. Where, for example, does it leave those who like Savage and Bennett [2005, 2] are concerned to stress the “distant relationship” between this work and “the sociology of stratification and class as practised in the UK and USA,” which they see as being created by the fact that Bourdieu's analyses *are* set within an overarching theory of social reproduction that the empiricists lack [cf. also Breuer 2008]? And, still more critically, where does it leave those who would take the significance of Bourdieu's work as extending far beyond the field of social stratification and as in fact providing an entire paradigmatic alternative – theoretical and methodological – to the sociology of the “positivistic” Anglo-American mainstream?¹

¹ Such Bourdieusiens are not, unfortunately, a mere figment of my imagination. See e.g. the response of Wuggenig [2007] to a paper by Tak Wing Chan and myself [2007a] in which we are specifically informed that Bourdieu's theory cannot be tested by the use of Anglo-American mainstream statistical methods – which Bourdieu has in fact “refuted” – and that in the context of the quite distinctive “field-theoretic” or “neo-structuralist” sociology that Bourdieu represents, only techniques such as correspondence analysis *à la française* are appropriate. See also our reply [Chan and Goldthorpe, 2007b].

In short, if it were to be taken seriously, Lizardo's intervention, far from resolving the problems I treated in my initial paper, would reveal Bourdieusiens to be yet more obviously and painfully impaled upon the horns of the dilemma to which I pointed of just how the master is to be understood and represented. In fact, I suspect that by the end of his remarks Lizardo is becoming uncomfortably aware of the maxim that if you are in a hole, it's best to stop digging, and is increasingly concerned about how his RC 28 version of Bourdieu might go down with the main body of the faithful. Thus, we have, as a quite anticlimactic conclusion, a shift over to the Bourdieusiens' second-line of defence against critics – after that of “misunderstanding and misrepresentation:” i.e. the argument that even if Bourdieu is wrong, or simply not clear enough to be wrong, his work can still be profitably mined for concepts and hypotheses, to be modified, refined, elaborated and adapted to particular purposes [cf. again Breuer 2008].

However, this does no more than bring the discussion back to the issues of central concern in my initial paper – and that Lizardo quite fails to address. Of course, we can all, in principle, be in favour of “inspired borrowing.” But since ideas have to be judged by their consequences, not their provenance, the crucial question is that of the consequences of taking over ideas from Bourdieu in the way that is envisaged. And again therefore we are returned to the issue of *which* Bourdieu is being “mined” – Bourdieu domesticated or wild or, if you wish, Bourdieu late or early. In the case of sociologists taking in effect the former option, some, as I accepted, have undoubtedly done valuable work under the acknowledged influence of Bourdieu. But, as I further sought to show through the example of “cultural capital” in the work of de Graaf and DiMaggio, these authors could just as well as have “borrowed” from other sources, and might then in fact have been able to present their findings in a more revealing and incisive way. On the other hand, in the case of those attracted to the latter option, the abiding problem is that I raised again in regard to “cultural capital,” and later more specifically in regard to the comments of Savage, Warde and Devine [Goldthorpe 2007b], of getting from programme to performance: i.e. of moving from the exegesis of the sacred texts to showing how *ur*-Bourdeusien concepts can in fact be adapted so as to give a basis for systematic empirical observation and then for constructing – testable – theories with appropriate explanatory potential. Substantive results are still awaited.

I thus maintain my position that, on the presently available evidence, the once highly fashionable – though now diminishing – “resort to Bourdieu” has done at least as much to compromise as to enhance fruitful sociological analysis.

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