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David L. Swartz, "Symbolic Power, Politics and Intellectuals. The Political Sociology of Pierre Bourdieu". Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013, 304 pp.

(doi: 10.2383/79487)

Sociologica (ISSN 1971-8853)

Fascicolo 3, settembre-dicembre 2014

Ente di afferenza:

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Book Review “Focus On Pierre Bourdieu”

David L. Swartz, *Symbolic Power, Politics and Intellectuals. The Political Sociology of Pierre Bourdieu*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013, 304 pp.

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Bourdieu is only seldom read as a political sociologist. Little international scholarly attention has been devoted to Bourdieu as a political sociologist (and philosopher). Loic Wacquant already pointed out this in the preface to a book containing some bourdieusian texts of political sociology [Wacquant 2005]. Even the author of this review recently took over the strange fate suffered by the scientific work devoted by Bourdieu to the political and power fields [Paolucci 2014], which is largely neglected – and even less appreciated – especially in Italy. Yet both the theoretical reflection and the empirical research might benefit significantly from the use of the conceptual tools developed by Bourdieu for the analysis of the forms of domination *of* politics and *in* politics. This fate results particularly odd in the light of the importance that this part of the work of the French sociologist plays as a contribution to the understanding of the dynamics of the politics, as well as for the place it occupies in the whole of his *opus*.

Such a misrecognition, which obviously takes on different forms in each country, describes the features of the receiving *fields* better than what could be done by hundreds of written pages, as Bourdieu himself has taught us. Indeed, when you consider the strictness with which Bourdieu unmasks the alchemy that structures and legitimizes politics, as well as the radicalism of his point of view on the forms of symbolic domination exercised by the State, it cannot be excluded that this “oversight” – if not real hostility – is to be attributed precisely to the irreverence with which he unveiled the most hidden and therefore more effective devices of symbolic violence.

The volume of David Swartz, *Symbolic Power, Politics and Intellectuals. The Political Sociology of Pierre Bourdieu*, reverses this trend. Professor of sociology at the University of Boston and familiar with the bourdieusian work, David Swartz is the author of important publications on the work of the French sociologist (among these it is worth mentioning: *Culture and Power. The Sociology of Pierre Bourdieu*, and *After Bourdieu: Influence, Critique, Elaboration*, co-edited with Vera Zolberg). The latest book is credited, among other things, to fill the void mentioned above by offering a complete and articulated picture of the innovative contribution of Bourdieu to political sociology. As Swartz stresses that “Bourdieu offers not only a sociology of politics, but also a politics of sociology,” he virtually subdivides his book into two parts: the first one is devoted to Bourdieu’s political sociology, while the other one gives an overview of his political engagement as a “collective intellectual.”

Taking as a point of departure the firm conviction that “power stands at the core of Bourdieu’s sociology,” in the first five chapters Swartz reconstructs the routes through which the French sociologist comes to build a homogeneous and consistent theory of power and State domination. A theory that is beautifully summarized in the lectures on the State that Bourdieu held at the Collège de France and that have been recently collected in a book by Seuil [Bourdieu 2012].

The author points out how Bourdieu had a deep interest for the issues related to dominion already since the beginning of the 1970s, as shown by his writings on the notion of public opinion [Bourdieu 1971], on the dominant ideology [Bourdieu and Boltanski 1976], and on the analysis of the social conditions of political competence [Bourdieu 1977]. Bourdieu's interest for politics is then refined during the 1980s and 1990s through both the development of a more systematic definition of the political field [Bourdieu 1981a] as a field that seeks to impose a legitimate vision of the social world, and the analysis of the conditions of possibility for political efficacy [Bourdieu 1981b]. Swartz correctly emphasizes the late formulation of the theory of the State in Bourdieu's career, which appears with the first definition of the State in *Homo Academicus* at the beginning of the 1980s as that "official name, conferred by an official authority, recognize as legitimate, that is, by the state, holder of the monopoly of legitimate symbolic violence" [Bourdieu 1984]. This theory will be further developed and clarified in several works devoted to the devices of symbolic violence implemented by the State institutions, first of all the school system [Bourdieu 1989a; 1993; 2000].

Swartz appropriately grasps at the concept of symbolic power, to which he devotes an entire chapter of the book ("For a Sociology of Symbolic Power"), the focus of Bourdieu's political sociology. Along with the pages devoted to the State ("Bourdieu's Analysis of the State"), this part of the book is the core of Swartz's book because it convincingly highlights the intimate connection between the theory of the State and the theory of symbolic domination (or more precisely, of symbolic violence). They are two research directions that cannot be seen as separate in Bourdieu's thought. If the theory of symbolic dimension of social world explains "under what conditions [the] symbolic power can become a power of constitution [...] that is the power to impose upon other minds a vision, old or new, of social divisions" [Bourdieu 1989b], the analysis of State institutions sheds light on the practical operating devices of dominion. Therefore the topic of the State is not an isolated issue that eventually joins the other subjects of political sociology, but it rather crosses the whole bourdieusian corpus although it never became the unitary object of a book until the posthumous publication of the lectures at the Collège de France.

"Central bank of symbolic capital," the State guarantees all acts of "legitimate imposture" as in the case of the "mysterious power of appointment", expression *par excellence* of what Bourdieu calls the "magic of the State." The modern State is for Bourdieu not only the agency that "successfully claims for itself the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical violence" – as stated in the well-known Weberian formula – but it is also the organization that holds "the monopoly of legitimate symbolic violence, to the extent that the monopoly of symbolic violence is the condition for the exercise of monopoly of the same physical violence" [Bourdieu 2012, 14]. In a sense, then, the definition of Bourdieu lays the foundations of the Weberian definition. The modern State is the outcome of struggles that led to the emergence of a kind of capital which is properly of the State – a sort of meta-capital – and it allows the exercise of symbolic power in all fields and on other kinds of capital, in particular on the exchange rates among them (indeed, the balance of power among the holders). According to Bourdieu, the State is therefore not (as assumed by some "democratic" *doxa*) the expression of a hypothetical pre-existing civil society arising and expressing itself through the government to whom organisational power is entrusted. Bourdieu deems such a perspective and all

the contractualist traditions as being completely false. Such a representation has become established and propagated as to becoming at least sometime scholarly *doxa* because the State – the main producer of the instruments to construct social reality – “produces and imposes categories of thought that we spontaneously apply to all things of the social world, *including the State itself*” [Bourdieu 1984, 1]. On this point Swartz dwells with particular attention, highlighting the importance of the topic – so dear to Bourdieu – of belief as the foundation for legitimacy. If the “State actions” are effective, it is only because we believe that there is a principle which grounds their legitimacy, Bourdieu argues. Here it is clear, as Swartz highlights, the debt Bourdieu holds not only towards Weber – as already evident – but also towards the Marxian perspective on the State, which becomes integral part – albeit critically – of his own approach. The notions of official, public, universal – all attributes that the State ascribes to itself – are actually illusions, the result of a symbolic structure. If the State offers its citizens “the show of the universal” and compels them to believe that the State viewpoint on the social world is a “viewpoint with no viewpoints” – i.e. a universal and uninvolved viewpoint – it does nothing but reinforce a particular viewpoint, i.e. that of the dominant. Thus, the show of the universal derives from “the effect of deification” required to provide grounds to an utterly arbitrary legitimacy. Like Janus, the State has two faces, because “one cannot have the universe without being a monopoliser of the universal” [Bourdieu 1984, 162]. Therefore, the process of concentration of the various species of capital analysed by Bourdieu is the process of dispossession (see the formation of a national language) and monopolization: the “monopolization of the universal” [Bourdieu 1984, 166].

The second part of the book is dedicated to the bourdieusian conception of sociology as political engagement and to the political impact that the social sciences exercise in the social world. Swartz correctly points out how Bourdieu’s political sociology cannot be separated from the function attributed to scientific work: the two dimensions are intrinsically intertwined. As Swartz observes in the chapter dedicated to this topic (“For an Intellectual Politics of Symbolic Power”), “Bourdieu offers not only a sociology of politics but also a politics of sociology” (p. 154). He stresses that in the bourdieusian thought, sociology is a kind of political practice in the name of science, because the science of the social world can only be “social criticism:” “For Bourdieu, doing sociology is doing politics in a different way” [*ibidem*]. Swartz focuses on this relevant aspect of the bourdieusian conception of the social sciences, by highlighting how Bourdieu considers scientific work as the key tool to unveil the domination structures.

The Enlightened confidence that Bourdieu harbours towards the function of sociological rationality obviously presents many problems of epistemological nature, that are briefly mentioned by Swartz. The simultaneous ambition to the scientificity and critical self-reflection (what Bourdieu calls “epistemic reflexivity”), paired with the feeling of being “embarked” in the social world – to use one of his favourite Pascal’s maxim – is undoubtedly a schizophrenic situation. Nevertheless Bourdieu bets exactly on this necessity to be simultaneously inside and outside to gain access to that “scientific city” which is a real rational utopia sealed in its own autonomy, as pointed out by Pierre Macherey.

This attitude makes sense of the long and complex activity carried on by Bourdieu to clear his horizon from the “scholastic illusion” and to create a concrete knowing subject able to access the truth of social reality, although besieged as everyone from the

doxa. This is the misery and greatness of the sociologist, who sheds light on the implicit of the social world and of his own condition.

As Marx wishes for “the becoming of philosophy as real,” Bourdieu attributes to sociological knowledge, and to its capacity of unmasking the devices of dominion, a function of subversion of the social order. But from here the paths of Marx and Bourdieu diverge. Indeed, in the case of Marx the realization of philosophy is mediated by the *praxis*, while according to Bourdieu the preferred, if not unique, instrument of political subversion is sociological knowledge. Nevertheless, the assumed ontological priority of the sociological reason on political practice at the heart of a theory that postulates the somatisation of dominion, endangers a significant portion of the theoretical bourdieusian construction, and it does raise questions which we still have to answer, *with and against* Bourdieu.

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