

Chapter 2: Bourdieu's writings on economics and the economy

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Introduction

Since the beginning of his scholarly endeavours, Bourdieu's conception of society has integrated 'the economic dimension' as a central element. The 'economic order' was for him an object of empirical study, but it was also a permanent source of theoretical reflexion, which could be transferred to other domains, such as education and culture. Even though his work is closely connected to, sometimes directly inspired by, economics, he develops a separate and autonomous set of analytical tools, which in return may be used to renew the analysis of economic realities, provided they are applied with a clear awareness of contexts and historical conditions. We begin by presenting the genesis of Bourdieu's sociology and its main concepts to show how Bourdieu contributed to the empirical knowledge of the economic field. Then we present its basic theoretical points as regards the economic field.

The genesis of Bourdieu's sociology and his conceptual apparatus

Trained as a French philosopher, Bourdieu became a sociologist in Algeria (at that time part of France) during the second half of the 1950s. There he worked as a university assistant, in Algiers, right after his military service during the 'Algerian war'. In 1958, on the basis of intensive readings of French and British anthropologists and a first set of ethnographic observations, Bourdieu wrote his first book, an erudite synthesis, *Sociologie de l'Algérie*, which was soon translated into English under the title *The Algerians* (Bourdieu, 1961).

In this book, we observe that early on Bourdieu develops an interdisciplinary perspective on the society and the economy. This novel outlook is strongly influenced by the work of Max Weber on capitalism, as indicated by the basic use of the concept of 'ethos', defined as the system of economic concrete values of a group. For Bourdieu, 'economic rationality' is not a 'natural' characteristic of individuals but the arbitrary historical result of their socialisation inside a social group and an economic system. In particular, he analyses the contradictions between capitalist rationality, which is imposed by colonial institutions and various (state and non-state) actors, and traditional norms, which are reproduced through informal socialisation and founded on the logic of honor-based reciprocity and the refusal of any individual accumulation. Traditional norms tend to prevail, but are put under growing pressure in light of overpowering capitalist forces introduced by formal colonial and state institutions. For example, watching the fields and the way plants grow, though unproductive in capitalist terms, was traditionally conceived as an activity, as a contribution. However, with the introduction of a productive and profit-oriented mind, this activity begins to be perceived as 'unemployment' (for a recent discussion, see Martin-Criado, 2008: 63).

This analysis was developed and refined in the following years through in-depth empirical work,

with his former Algerian student Abdelmalek Sayad (Bourdieu and Sayad, 1964), and also in collaboration with young official statisticians working on the French labour-force survey (Bourdieu et al., 1963). In these works, Bourdieu developed a critical analysis of official statistics, like the notion of ‘unemployment’, which appear inadequate when they are mechanically transferred from one society to another. In a traditional society, unemployment is kept invisible, as there is no clear-cut distinction between activity and non-activity, productive and non-productive tasks. In surveys about employment, people tend to respond that they are employed even when their level of real activity is close to zero. On the other hand, the more traditional a region is, the less it is inclined to define non-active situations in terms of ‘unemployment’ (see Bourdieu et al., 1963).

In the 1960s, Bourdieu returned to France and deployed his (intensively trained) ethnological eye in the context of his own birth region, the Béarn (in the deep south-west of France, close to Spain). By studying the evolution of marriages (and the growing number of bachelors) among poor peasants, he tried to explain the devaluation of masculine assets in matrimonial exchanges and strategies, in a period of intense social change: urbanisation, economic growth, growing access to education. The most traditionally socialised men, who work on the farm, are losing their value in the eyes of young women, in favour of more ‘urbanised’ and ‘modern’ dispositions. This is made obvious with the ethnographic analysis of the ‘bachelor’s party’ (‘le bal des célibataires’) where ‘traditionally-minded’ men are unable to cope with new dancing and acting codes (for a synthesis, see Bourdieu, 2002).

Through his teaching in Lille and Paris, and his leading role in the collective work undertaken at the *Centre de sociologie européenne* (Centre for European sociology at the *Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes* then *Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales*), directed by Raymond Aron, in the 1960s, Bourdieu participated in various important empirical studies. They were centred on the reproduction of class inequalities through Culture and School. *Les Héritiers* (*The Inheritors*) and *La Reproduction* (*Reproduction*), written with Jean-Claude Passeron, are the most famous books of this period, which gave birth to a strong impetus for the sociology of art, the sociology of culture and of course the sociology of education, in France and many other countries (see Sapiro, 2013). The study of class inequalities directly relates these fields to the study of the ‘productive system’ and the global economy, which can also be seen as a stratified social space. Bringing symbols, culture and education back in the study of social class is then a way to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the way social divisions structure the entire society, including the ‘productive sphere’.

In all these works, a close connection was realised between economics and sociology through the use of concepts like ‘exchange’, ‘heritage’, ‘capital’ (especially ‘cultural capital’), ‘profit’, ‘market’, ‘interest’. Bourdieu’s objective was to unify the conceptual apparatus of the social sciences without denying specificity to any particular social universe, like the economy itself. This double intellectual constraint led him to a sense of the multiplicity of social spheres, beyond that of economic production, in which a diverse set of economic and non-economic assets can be defined and accumulated. In a multidimensional conception of society, there are different sources of inequality, which need to be systematically analysed. Bourdieu will use Geometric Data Analysis, a set of statistical tools developed in France under the influence of Jean-Paul Benzécri, to grasp this multidimensionality of social structures (see Benzécri, 1973). In this statistical framework based on

abstract linear algebra, statistical observations are described as clouds of points in Euclidean spaces, a technique which allows us to have a more visual appraisal of statistical regularities (Lebaron, 2010).

From the second half of the sixties, Bourdieu develops his own theoretical apparatus, based on a reflexive re-reading of his previous empirical works. This conceptual apparatus is summarised in the 'tryptic' capital – habitus – field. In the following, we briefly describe this tryptic in relation to economics and the economy, along with his conception of symbolic violence.

Capital

The concept of 'cultural capital' (first 'cultural heritage') was initially developed as a metaphor coming from economics, transferred into the realm of culture, allowing to analyse particular inequalities and their familial process of transmission. Using economic models and concepts against economism (Lebaron, 2003), Bourdieu attempted to unify economics, and the analysis of cultural spheres ('cultural goods', 'cultural markets'...) around a 'materialistic' system of concepts, without reducing cultural practices to economic determinants.

Rapidly, other forms of capital helped Bourdieu to better assess the complexity of social structures and the always particularly shaped distribution of social resources: symbolic capital (referring to the accumulation of prestige on names, families, etc.), social capital (defined as a system of relational interactional resources, which are accumulated by individuals and families). These two types were especially relevant to understand the logic of the familial strategies of peasants in Béarn ('reproduction strategies'), but they can be seen as a universal aspect of social life in any society or organisation, including the most modern capitalist companies. Maintaining its 'image' (through the uses of various labels for example) and connecting to other key-actors in a field (through various informal and formal networks) appear major stakes for any large company.

Capital in this sense is related to a set of 'economic' concepts: 'accumulation', 'conversion', 'investment', 'profit' and also 'exchange'. The systematic use of these concepts extends the realm of economic categories substantially and has therefore been criticised (for example by Caillé or Favereau). But this 'Bourdieuconomics' (Svendsen and Svendsen, 2003) can also be seen as an attempt to unify the social sciences without reducing all social behaviours to economic interests. This is possible provided they are used in connection with a theory of practice (associated to the concept of habitus) and a theory of multidimensional social interests and structures (associated to the concept of field).

Habitus

Around 1966, while writing about Panofsky's analysis of Gothic architecture (Bourdieu, 1966), Bourdieu shifted from the Weberian notion of ethos (enlarged to social classes) to the concept of habitus, used in order to interpret individual's practices without losing their collective inscription. Habitus is the central concept which allows Bourdieu to propose an alternative to Rational Action

Theory (RAT). It is a system of dispositions, which are socially produced and reproduced and which tend (in a probabilistic and not deterministic way) to structure the representations, the actions, the 'tastes', etc., of individuals according to their various social experiences. Habitus is also the key to understanding the stability of social inequalities. Inequalities not only rely on economic assets, but also on the distribution of the diverse forms of non-economic capital. Through the habitus, these assets are deeply 'internalised', 'embodied', hence they are largely made unconscious and 'naturalised'.

Class habitus, that is, the dispositions developed by belonging to a certain social class, are related to 'culture' and 'education', not only to material living conditions, and to the global economic system, which favours particular dispositions, like ascetism or consumerism. In a capitalist society, habitus tends to be oriented toward economic rationality.

But as Bourdieu will first develop in *Esquisse d'une théorie de la pratique (Outline of a theory of practice)* and in subsequent books about rationality (especially, Bourdieu, 2000), RAT is an imaginary anthropological construction, which confuses the logic of things and the things of logic, in a classical scholastic biased conception. In other words, for Bourdieu, by defining action in abstract terms, RAT is actually typical of the way scholars tend to project their specific social and epistemic condition (they are 'cut' from action and practice, have time and can develop abstract reasoning) over their analysis of concrete reality, and thereby forget the real conditions of any concrete 'practice'. Practice is a fuzzy mobilisation of dispositions to their external environment. They imply a largely unconscious and physical adaptation, at the opposite of the pure computations of an abstract mind.

Field

Around the same time, while working on the social history of intellectuals and writers in a dialogue with Sartre, Bourdieu also felt the need for an 'intermediary' structure (or a 'social sub-system'), between individual agents and the global society, first in order to avoid all the oversimplifications based on a mechanical analysis of an author's or creator's class determinations. This gave birth to the concept of field, defined as a particular social space inside the global social space, where particular interests (what he calls 'illusio', or sense of the game) are at stake and particular assets are valued. This leads Bourdieu to a new conception of 'interest', embedded in the more comprehensive notion of 'belief in a game', that is related to a kind of psycho-sociological investment, which has specific features according to the fields.

The intellectual field provided a first example: the activity of creation cannot be reduced to the effects of class memberships as sometimes done in Marxist tradition, or seen through the lenses of economic imperialism as a quest for monetary profit. His reflexions on the notion of field will rapidly extend to the field of power that is the central place where the relative value of economic and non-economic assets is put into question and becomes the stakes of struggle between fractions of the dominant class. Then, it will be extended to the political and the economic fields.

This conception stresses the multidimensionality of the assets which are at stake inside a complex

society, including the economic field itself, much more diverse and complex than usually thought, always embedded in some symbolic dimension. Far from game theory, interactions between actors are symbolic in nature. They depend on this multidimensional set of resources and they are not the product of totally conscious strategies, even at top decision levels or in the most rationalised sectors like finance. And in opposition with Marxist class struggle, each field generates very specific kinds of stakes which oppose actors, particularly competitors and rivals, and not only social classes, around particular symbolic stakes.

Symbolic violence

Since his Algerian work, Bourdieu has tried to develop a conception of domination by the use of a general conception of symbolic life, based on Weber, Durkheim and Marx. The notion of ‘symbolic violence’ allows us to think about domination as a reality which is far beyond the direct use of physical violence and relies on the acceptance of the dominant – his status, words and representations – as ‘naturally dominant’.

This analysis directly applies to the internalisation of managerial legitimacy or to the acceptance of public policy measures, by workers and citizens, even if they contradict their apparent interest. Symbolic violence relates to the importance of language and discourse also in economic life. Through communication and the media, dominants tend to impose a set of representations and processes as natural and universal. By speaking, for example, in terms of ‘management’ and ‘governance’ instead of ‘chiefs’, hierarchical commandment and exploitation, this dominant economic-corporate discourse creates a pacified and cooperative representation of the economic world and denies any conflicting interests.

Bourdieu and the economic field: a set of empirical contributions

Bourdieu's first studies in Algeria provided him a consciousness of the historicity of economic structures, especially modern, post-World War II capitalism. As a historical long-term invention, modern capitalism depends on the systematic production and reproduction of economic dispositions (a particular ethos and habitus), especially as regards rationality, time and money. Agents must be oriented toward a rational ‘calculable’ future and must become able to actualise their income and profit, through more and more explicit and formal operations, etc. They tend to ‘accumulate’ economic capital, using rational instruments in that goal. But these dispositions vary according to their primary socialisation, their trajectory and more generally their social condition. Dimensions of ‘traditional’ societies (reciprocity, gift, etc.) remain important and always mixed with a more ‘modern’ economic rationality, which is rooted in practical routines and unconscious bases. This is obvious through the analysis of gift as a remaining feature in contemporary social life, and also through the notion of the particular non-economic *illuio* of certain fields (like the religious, bureaucratic, artistic or scientific fields), where being ‘interested’ is a matter of disqualification.

In 1963, Bourdieu coordinated a monograph realised by young scholars (Luc Boltanski and Jean-Claude Chamboredon) at the *Centre de sociologie européenne (Centre for european sociology)*.

This work initiated an original analysis of ‘credit’ as a central social relationship in contemporary economies, which would be systematised in *Les structures sociales de l'économie* (*The Social Structures of the Economy*), years later. The study showed that relations of an agent or a household to banks and credits depend strongly on agents’ and households’ social characteristics, embodied as an economic ethos. Moreover, it analysed the interactions between bank employees and credit customers as an unequal social relation, based on unequal linguistic and economic competence. It insisted on the social precondition for an alleged ‘natural’ kind of exchange on the market for credit. By analysing the concrete interactions between sellers and buyers in a marketplace (an exhibition hall), Bourdieu puts into light all the social dimensions involved in this apparently ‘natural’ transaction. He described the way buyers are divided into a set of new issues where they may be more or less at ease and ‘competent’ (from a linguistic and technical point of view, and also because they are less conscious of what is at stake in this interaction).

The surveys and publications on ‘tastes’ that Bourdieu produced since the 1960s (beginning with a survey on photography) and were of paramount interest for the study of consumption practices, culminated in the *magnum opus* *La Distinction* (*Distinction*) in 1979 (see Coulangeon, Duval dir., 2013). Among many other stakes, this book can also be seen as a major contribution to a sociology of consumption and lifestyles, which relates the individual's systems of tastes to their habitus that is perceived as a coherent matrix for any ‘individual’ or ‘collective’ choice, operating in a dialectical move between diffusion and distinction. *La Distinction* makes a concrete move toward an operational sociological analysis of (economic) ‘choice’, assuming that ‘tastes’ strongly matter in the economic field, and that ‘practices’ do not depend on the explicit consciousness of an objective and adequate means to fulfill it. Following this line, the analysis of the market for houses in *Les Structures sociales de l'économie* begins with an analysis of the social construction of the demand for houses, which varies across the social space, and of course across time and space. Tastes depend on social conditions, including cultural characteristics, and are the complex product of social trajectories, in a multidimensional social space. Here again, this conception is rather far from the RAT conception of a universal consumer, making rational decisions on the basis of prices and qualities, under a budget constraint, without mobilising her/his entire life-trajectory into any economic choice (as is the case in Bourdieu’s view).

Since the late 1960s, Bourdieu and his group were developing empirical research about leading groups, especially economic groups. In 1978, this led to an article, with Monique de Saint-Martin, about “Le patronat” (the “company leaders”), which developed an in-depth analysis of the various types of managers one found at the head of large French companies in the first half of the 1970s and the consequences as regards types of management. Among the main results was the persistence of an opposition between state-related company leaders, especially in finance, and familial traditional capitalism, but also the beginning ascension of business-school trained managers inside the field. This trend would become obvious ten years later when the book *La noblesse d'Etat* (*State Nobility*) was published (Bourdieu, 1989). Such changes will also be described in his work that was published in the late 1990s and dealt with the ascension of a new economic elite in the field of French literary publishers (Bourdieu, 1999).

In his work on ‘housing’, Bourdieu insisted on the complex relations of homology between the space of consumers and the space of producers in this particular field, as in any other economic

field. Actors deploy strategies to ‘produce’ (construct) the demand and, also, simultaneously, to adapt and react to it. He also showed the centrality of public actors in the dynamics of the field. The field of public policy makers is then seen as always part of the study of any kind of market or sector.

Rather far from the use of a simplified model of economic action, for example inspired by game theory, Bourdieu prefers to stress the complex web of interdependences which fundamentally (and unconsciously) organise a field and its concrete historical dynamics. One therefore first needs to describe the concrete characteristics of ‘efficient agents’ and their relationships before studying the concrete way they adapt to changing structural conditions.

A theory of the economic field

If one tries to sum up Bourdieu's theoretical contribution in economics without losing too much of the richness of his empirical analyses, which ran over 40 years of various empirical investigations, several elements can be mentioned:

- Economic individual actors are the product of their social experiences, largely unconscious and embodied: they structure their tastes, but also their strategies and orientations in the economic field, including at the top of companies or in the political and bureaucratic fields. This is the way Bourdieu challenges classical rational action theory with an original sociological theory of practice, opening to a set of systematic observations (and possibly, today, to a dialogue with neuroeconomics and experimental economics).
- Economic structures appear as strong constraining frames for individual and collective actions: they cannot be reduced to the networks of interrelations between various nodes, since they more deeply consist in multidimensional social spaces, fundamentally structured by the distribution of various assets (symbolic, cultural and social capital as well as economic).
- Domination is a central aspect of Bourdieu's conception of the economy: either in the global social space or in any specific economic field, the polarisation between dominant groups and the others strongly structures any concrete interaction between them. This domination is both concrete (material, physical...) and symbolic, varies across time and space, and does not reduce to ‘class-struggle’ in the Marxist sense.
- Capitalism is a historical construction, rooted in long-term changes in social dispositions as well as the invention of specific institutions, especially credit and bank, but also the State.
- The economic *illusio*, that is the fundamental belief which is at the basis of the economic field as an autonomous ‘game’ (‘business is business’), is a complex historical product, in which economics has played a major role, in providing a sophisticated representation of individual actors and markets.
- Markets are always connected to the political sphere, and their dynamics depend on the bureaucratic field as well as changes in the economic field itself.

Bourdieu's sociology has proven being very flexible and adaptable to a large amount of empirical objects, including realities situated at the heart of modern capitalism, like finance and decisions of investment. It can therefore highly contribute to the contemporary reflexion on an ‘alternative economic thinking’ which takes seriously the need for pluralistic methodologies and for various

exchanges between intellectual traditions and scientific methodologies.