

11 Bourdieu in a multi-dimensional perspective

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The present book illustrates the vitality and the accuracy of Bourdieu's work in contemporary debates and research in the field of sociology, and more generally in the field of social sciences. The simple fact that some of the critical assessments of his scientific conceptions, which this book contains, re-organize or re-activate what previous critical accounts originally illustrated, testifies to the still provocative content of these conceptions. This book also shows that new 'lines' or 'forms' of critique and new controversial points express a large and moving set of complex interactions between Bourdieu's theory and the contemporary global sociological field, evident in processes of import and export of concepts, themes and methods.

These interactions can result in new foci and in attempts to create adequate instruments for capturing emerging social realities (for example, through a 'hybridization' between Bourdieu and other theoretical traditions). This particular outcome of his work is consistent with Bourdieu's conception of sociological theory as a collective patrimony or as an intellectual 'toolbox' at the disposal of the researcher (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992): for him, one should take from and leave in this universal toolbox according to the stakes, the sociological problems, the interpretative needs of empirical research, the limits of existing theoretical conceptions, and so on. After years of various synthetic publications following his death (in French, see especially the synthesis by Mauger (2005)), as Elizabeth Silva and Alan Warde show in the introduction, Bourdieu still generates scientific controversy and can hardly be ignored in a large number of sub-fields where his theory is discussed, applied and criticized.

This dynamism is partially related to what I call the *multidimensionality* of Bourdieu's work itself. This is so because: (1) the theoretical and empirical contributions are diverse and creative in various ways; (2) the contributions are interrelated by a complex, and often ignored, web of theoretical and methodological links; (3) the body of work is framed, since the first texts on Algeria,¹ by a common theoretical perspective or orientation despite some variation in lexicon, polemical focus and methodology. One could describe this 'framing' theory as a particular sort of 'grounded theory' (in Glaser and Strauss's definition (1967)) in the sense that Bourdieu's theoretical conception is at least partially the result of an inductive process of 'generalization', going from limited empirical observation to systematic comparisons, through the transpositions of schemes or concepts from one field to

another (see Lebaron (2004)). ‘Bourdieu’s theory’ has a dual form, as an evolutionary, context-oriented, flexible network of theoretical objects or operations, but also, from another point of view, as a limited and stable set of concepts which ‘concentrates’ sociological theory into a model that is both simple and universally applicable. The concepts (habitus, field, capital and others) were consciously constructed, after a long process of trials and errors, for the need of empirical ‘generalization’ or for practical comparisons between different constructed research objects. They were also invented in order to help to produce a large amount of new consistent observations; for Bourdieu’s methodology, which is more a sociological practice than a formalized ‘canon’, is systematically integrated in his theoretical reflection and it is a part of his innovative posture (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992).

After describing Bourdieu’s work as a space in itself, I will briefly analyse the space of reception of his work in order to situate the contributions in this book. I will evoke Bourdieu’s work as the product of particular theoretical and practical choices, as those discussed in this book. In the last section, I will focus on Bourdieu’s very specific definition of sociological practice as the articulation of quantitative objectification and ethnographic fieldwork. I will argue that this articulation is still in its infancy in formulating a general research programme as envisaged from the development of Bourdieu’s work.

Bourdieu’s work as a space

Since his early work in Algeria, Bourdieu developed a ‘relational’ vision of the social world, which he applied to various sorts of problems and objects. These included the transition from a traditional to a capitalist society; the tendencies to social reproduction related to cultural capital inequalities; the genesis and functioning of specific social universes devoted to symbolic goals (especially the literary and philosophical fields); the social conditions of sociological knowledge, taste and class; the social suffering resulting from the transformation of the welfare state, economic and social policies; and the market of private housing.

The range of subjects investigated by Bourdieu is closely related to his social and scientific trajectory. He began his career with a rupture from speculative philosophy through a deep dive into ethnographic work in Algeria. He then practised large survey quantitative research, combining it with the use of various qualitative techniques in the collective dynamics of his research group at the *Centre de Sociologie Européenne*. He developed his theoretical apparatus in close connection with various empirical investigations, and never ceased to multiply empirical case studies, embedded in a more and more systematic – and also, to some extent, ‘concentrated’ – theory. He never ceased to cross the fields of academic thought and never thought of himself as the academic expert of a well-delimited domain, but more as a theoretical inventor making ‘fire from any sort of wood’ (*faire feu de tout bois*, as the French say (Lebaron, 2004)).

A large part of his better known books – like *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*, which was central for the international reception of his work (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992) – aimed at diffusing a *modus operandi* related to what he calls a

scientific habitus: sociology is first of all a *practice* of empirical research, where theory is always framing concrete operations, like observing a particular ordinary life situation, interacting with people during an interview, writing an ethnographic journal, coding the results of a questionnaire, interpreting axes from a Multiple Correspondence Analysis, producing an article as the particular focused synthesis of empirical results, and so on.

The first issues of the journal he created in 1975, *Actes de la Recherche en Sciences Sociales*, show that he did not conceive the presentation of the final results of a project as the ultimate goal of sociological research. He also considered it important, if not necessary, to formulate research programmes, propagate sociological practice and extend the powers of the ‘sociological eye’ through practice and examples taken from the most heterogeneous, and contrasting, social realities.

When he entered a theme of enquiry, Bourdieu was particularly aware of the space of dominant interpreters in competition to ‘tell the truth’ about the particular problem or object under scrutiny. Many of his writings attempt to counter-balance a dominant conception or *doxa*, as he reacted against a scientific ‘deviation’ or a ‘bias’ that he considered particularly dangerous or misleading, as the product of field-specific social conditions (Pinto, 2002). He situated himself in dialectical and controversial relations to other social scientists. Part of his work has therefore a strong polemical charge aimed in three key directions: (1) against the limits of structural(ist) theory of action, countering the objectivist and positivist vision of class derived from Marxism or Weberian stratification studies and developed in large survey research; (2) against the a-sociological and imaginary prophecies of postmodernism; (3) against the false anthropology of rational choice theory. Depending on the object and the specific figuration of leading sociological discourses about it, his posture could move and focus on one or another polemical stake without losing its specific purposes. For example, he was very critical of Robert K. Merton’s too idealistic vision of science in a well-known article about the scientific field (‘La spécificité du champ scientifique ...’, Bourdieu (1975a)). However, with the success of relativist accounts of science since the 1980s, especially following Bruno Latour, the target became, in his last writings on science (Bourdieu, 2001c), much more the tendency to reduce science activity to power relations in the ‘new’ sociology of science (Merton becoming an ‘ally’). Yet over time his conception of scientific autonomy remained unchanged: the polemical stakes changed but not the scientific line of argument.

The space of Bourdieu’s reception: international contexts

Since the first publication of his survey results about metropolitan France, especially in the 1964 book *Les héritiers (The Inheritors)* with Jean-Claude Passeron, which was based on official data about inequalities in higher education and can be seen as the basis of the theory of cultural reproduction, Bourdieu’s work has been under the fire of a very large variety of critiques, coming from different social and intellectual positions in the scientific – and also the political – field, changing according to contexts, the appearance of new theoretical hypotheses and

methodological fashions or ‘new research tools’. A systematic sociology of the reception of his work would require a very large and complex empirical survey, which should try to avoid oversimplification, interpreting a sufficient number of relevant dimensions (to speak like data analysts), strata or levels. One should at least distinguish between direct confrontations to ‘Bourdieu’s theory’ and more specific, often also more nuanced and detailed, discussions of the interpretations he proposes for particular objects or themes in his empirical analyses. There is a certain gap between both types of discussion, related to the segmentation of the international sociological field, between ‘sociological theory’ and particular domains of research, which tend to pursue their programmes with disregard for, or in competition with, ‘pure’ theoreticians. A second and more damaging confrontation with Bourdieu is often implicitly made between his theory and his methodological choices or practices, especially when he tries to articulate quantitative survey data (using Geometric Data Analysis) and ethnographic or qualitative material in order to ‘quantify’ his theory (Robson and Sanders, 2009).

Some aspects of Bourdieu’s reception are related to the international and disciplinary traditions in which he is read, cited and used for empirical or theoretical purposes. We have in this book a good illustration of the ways the British and, to a lesser extent, the North-American sociological fields have recently developed their own reception and interpretation of Bourdieu, which are partially disconnected from the broad literature on Bourdieu in French, which remains largely not translated into English.

In the UK this reception is for example very much related to the way Bourdieu’s writings challenge both the sociological narrative about the decline of class and largely ignore the growing debate about class identity and ‘dis-identification’, as argue Mike Savage, Elizabeth Silva and Alan Warde in Chapter 5. These debates were never really present as such in Bourdieu’s ‘polemical space’, where, on the contrary, historical accounts for the symbolic and political existence, or non-existence, of ‘class’ or ‘groups’ (cf. E. P. Thompson) was central. This historical approach would be his way to grasp and, above all, criticize the notion of ‘identity’ (whatever its use). Bourdieu would hardly discuss class self-identification without a long account of the way the representatives of different groups – and also ‘legitimate’ social discourse producers, including the media and political actors – create and manipulate categories and never cease to struggle, in order to impose their categories in various fields. The sociology of classification, as part of the sociology of knowledge and political sociology, is for Bourdieu a precondition for a study of spontaneous self-identification discourses of any kind, but it cannot be isolated from the study of the various fields in which dominant classifications are produced and diffused by particular social agents.

Another illustration of this international reception process concerns the intellectual debate with Foucault, which is here presented and analysed by Tony Bennett in Chapter 8. Close colleagues at the *Collège de France*, Bourdieu and Foucault never really engaged in a systematic theoretical confrontation between ‘philosophical systems’, as *normaliens* would traditionally do. Bourdieu used Foucault in his writings as the illustration of an epistemic pole associated to what he saw as a

more general discursive-reducing conception of 'fields', in line with the traditional (and socially determined) philosophical focus on texts, which largely ignore the social properties of intellectual producers and their interrelations, and, of course, thereby implicitly refuse empirical sociological methodology. Foucault was part of the more general polemics of Bourdieu against philosophical biases (which he called later, more generally, 'scholastic biases') and Foucault was not really discussed as a contributor to a specific research object. The creation *post-mortem* of this polemical space can appear a bit artificial, though interesting and stimulating as an attempt to hybridize close but distinct theories. In his focus on 'neo-liberal governmentality' and the stakes it generates for social sciences, the positions presented by Bennett in the British context seem surprisingly the reverse of the French one, where Bourdieu, together with Foucault's biographer Didier Eribon (2001), tried to save Foucault from a vulgar enterprise of political recuperation at the end of the 1990s. François Ewald, former close collaborator of Foucault, had become a theoretician of the Confederation of French Industries (the *Mouvement des Entreprises de France*) without abandoning his Foucauldian allegiance and legitimacy. He referred to Foucault in an attempt to reorganize the balance of corporations' power in favour of the managers and company leaders at the expense of the unions. Bourdieu with Eribon organized a conference about Foucault reaffirming the radicality of Foucault's thought against this misuse (Eribon, 2001). In the UK, Foucault is probably more often seen as a 'radical thinker' and Bourdieu as an 'survey' sociologist, which means closer to official statistical production. In France, on the contrary, Bourdieu, and not Foucault, is often associated with the most recent social contestations, including feminist or gay and lesbian movements (Eribon, 2007)

David Swartz's account of Bourdieu's political sociology in Chapter 4 presents his theoretical contribution as being largely ignored by mainstream international political science and insists on his various contributions to understanding power and domination as a decisive breakthrough in this field. In France, the situation is much more ambivalent than that observed by Swartz in the Anglo-Saxon American world, since a very large reception and appropriation of Bourdieu has already radically changed the landscape of French political science. Bourdieu's constructivist claims on class formation, the role of a *porte-parole* (spokesperson) and his focus on symbolic struggles and stakes have largely penetrated the field of political science, affecting areas of electoral research (focused on the biographical determinations of vote and abstention and the critique of opinion polls biases) and the sociology of political parties (the social bases of political organizations and the relations between these properties and their symbolic modes of existence and political resources). Empirical systematic investigations about the characteristics of élite groups (like the European civil servants and lobbyists) have also helped understand shifts in public policies, and the development of 'socio-history' as a field crossing into political science. All the mainstream fields of political science in France have been more or less deeply influenced by Bourdieu's conception of sociological practice and, to some extent, by his theoretical apparatus and empirical findings. It would be interesting, in line with Swartz, to understand why this French

renewal of the discipline seems largely not to have been exported. This certainly relates to the functioning of the international academic fields, the domination of English language in scientific communication and the imposition of specific intellectual traditions in political sociology, which remain untouched by Bourdieu's sociological practice.

The space of Bourdieu's reception: theoretical choices

Most of the critiques developed in this book relate to the space of theoretical choices in which Bourdieu can be situated, but often at the price of abstraction from his empirical case-studies. The present book reactivates persistent critical assessments of Bourdieu's theory, introduces new ones (see above on class 'dis-identification'), as well as it illustrates some of the remaining lines of defence developed by Bourdieu and his followers. Certainly, some contributors also produce empirical analyses strongly inspired by Bourdieu's research programme, as occurs in Chapter 3, where Rick Fantasia makes an excellent illustration of the potential of Bourdieu's theory of symbolic goods when it is applied to the field of gastronomy. Following Michael Grenfell's argument in Chapter 2, namely that one can classify the critiques along various lines and levels, I note that the critiques share the implicit idea that Bourdieu's presence in contemporary sociological debates is challenging other theoretical or empirical enterprises. I focus on some of the dominant features of this challenge.

The basic and dominant critiques of Bourdieu usually insist on distinguishing between what his apparatus may shed light on *and* on what it deliberately ignores, completely fails to grasp, distorts, or makes invisible. These critiques often operate by reactivating classical philosophical oppositions like freedom/determinism, reflexivity/unconscious, subject/object, and so on. Bourdieu's theory is often associated with one of the philosophical poles of the epistemic couples that he, very precisely, wanted to avoid. His theory is commonly seen as offering a too mechanistic and deterministic vision of social action, and various authors try to enlarge it by introducing a stronger focus on ethics, reflexivity, consciousness, dis-identification, social ambiguities or ambivalences. This is the case in Diane Reay's contribution (Chapter 6). Another critical approach involves moving clearly away from Bourdieu's 'limited' French perspective to adopt an alternative theoretical framework (Lamont's contribution (Chapter 10), is an example), which can be combined, in a more 'Bourdieu-style' kind of polemical confrontation, to explain its attraction. Antoine Hennion (Chapter 9) follows this approach based on an alternative perspective which presupposes a generalized social intuition of social groups, despite the theoretical limits and biases of such conception.

The assimilation of Bourdieu to one pole of the philosophical space can be interpreted, following Louis Pinto (2002), as an indicator of the strength of the philosophical habitus which frames the reader's perception of his work. This imposes a certain perception of his key concepts on the basis of pre-existing dominant traditional taxonomies. These critiques too often isolate sociological concepts from three main aspects which Bourdieu held as essential for sociological practice:

(1) the social and intellectual context, or the ‘polemical space’ as I coined it, in which concepts were produced; (2) the practical use of concepts precisely in order to avoid scholastic oppositions; and finally, (3) the survey results, observations, qualitative data, of which the concepts were first supposed to make sense. These three operations are precisely related to what Bourdieu critically dismissed in his notion of ‘scholastic bias’.

Intellectual strategies, illustrated here in different chapters, are often based on an attempt to *enlarge* Bourdieu’s theory to less automatic and reproductive behaviour, allowing a larger place for reflexivity, conscious action, and ethical deliberation. The notion of the habitus is of course the most discussed in this perspective. One can here recall that habitus was the new formulation of the notion of *ethos* which Bourdieu explicitly took from Weber after his Algerian period and rethought in more Marxist and Durkheimian terms (Lebaron, 2009a). Habitus is a systematic operator of practices, related to past social experience, which largely determines the way people react in an ordinary situation (reproducing its conditions of formation) or in radically new situations (like strong economic changes, where habitus also frames the way people react, adapt and invent). The main issue is here the degree of predictability of social behaviour and perceptions that the notion of habitus posits. If one leaves aside a strictly deterministic view, which was never in Bourdieu’s mind, this issue can be formulated in terms of *probability* (of a particular practice, a choice, a position taking). Is ‘self-reflexivity’ itself not a part of a transformation of habitus into more strategic and rationalized automatism, observable in specific groups or fields? If one admits that the notion of the habitus, embedded in a corporal conception of action, much stressed by Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) relates to the process of social cognition and to the way the human brain is socially ‘constructed’, one can associate it with the importance of ‘neuronal plasticity’ and with the re-evaluation of ‘procedural memory’ in any – more or less – rationalized/expert competence or action. This would mean that Bourdieu did account for aspects which Andrew Sayer (Chapter 7) accuses him of disregarding. If one associates habitus not strictly with the reproduction of original conditions but also with adaptation and invention in new situations, the various empirical observations of concrete habitus and their changes open a large space for a sociological research programme. This has only partially begun to be developed.

Bourdieu’s sociological programme and its future

One could argue that Bourdieu’s conception of sociological theory is, first of all, ‘pragmatic’, in the sense that sociological theory is for him a ‘toolbox’ helping to interpret sociological observations. For him sociological ‘laws’ are the product of an accumulation of converging observations which allow progressive and slow generalization towards more and more solid theoretical propositions.

If this general epistemology of sociology (‘theory of the social (world)’, following the terms of *Le métier de sociologue*, reactivated by Pinto (2002)) is accepted, a discussion of Bourdieu’s work depends more on the degree of ‘robustness’ of the empirical conclusions resulting from the careful application of notions like habitus,

capital and field, than on the intrinsic virtues of these concepts in an abstract space. At this level of empirical findings, it is necessary to recall that Bourdieu's work itself is a 'multi-level' and multi-faceted operation of sociological formalization.

To understand the peculiar status of Bourdieu's theory, which may explain its strength despite the remaining – though partially changing – logical or philosophical critiques, one has to recall that since the 1950s he had tried to construct this theory by combining different approaches. He sought to articulate 'thick' ethnographic descriptions (in the French 'Maussian' tradition, which he supported all his life, as illustrated in articles in his journal *Actes* or work like that of his follower Loïc Wacquant), with the interpretation of quantitative data. His quantitative leanings were much influenced by neo-classical economics and econometrics, but with a strong awareness of the limits of positivism, and a persistent need for a structural vision of society, which led him to use Geometric Data Analysis (GDA) methods after 1970 (Lebaron, 2009b).

His theoretical conception can be seen as a general frame, in the sense that it describes the various fundamental components of any social space on the basis of previous empirical observations and theoretical conclusions. But, of course, Bourdieu does not propose a precise model of each particular social space or field; rather, each should be investigated following his general perspective not by means of a mechanical application of static concepts. His perspective actually offers a rather open and broad vision of the components to be included in the structural analysis of a society, a group or a field. Homologies between two national figurations can be more or less important, and the *degree* of similarity is itself a matter of sociological debates. Yet, the main operation of sociological formalization rests in the definition of social distance (a very concrete operation in GDA), which allows the construction of a relevant space and the interpretation of its particular structure, leading to the analysis of its predictive aspects.

Qualitative observations make sense when the researchers keep in mind the entire 'construction of the research object' as a structural frame. It is dangerous to separate the analysis of an interaction or behaviour from the global structure in which it creates or expresses some difference or some meaning. In structural linguistics the difference between phonemes is at the basis of the creation or expression of meanings. The social structure itself needs concrete elements to be fully interpreted. In the general research programme derived from Bourdieu's work, sociological theory should be incorporated inside each concrete research operation and only developed more at the stage of the writing of the sociological interpretation.

One could conclude, following these few brief observations, that a theoretical discussion of Bourdieu's work is, at this stage of the history of the sociological field, less useful than the collective creation of a new dialectics between the empirical results emerging from a research programme inspired by Bourdieu, and the various challenging or contradictory results or theoretical generalizations coming from other traditions or research programmes. The contributions of this book clearly go in this direction; they open themselves a large 'space'. This book should be followed by new steps in a now collective, critical, and necessarily international,

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scientific field process to enlarge and solidify the sociological understanding of contemporary practices.

Note

- 1 Recent publications recall the conditions in which Bourdieu developed a theoretically ambitious perspective, through a very specific empirical investigation, during the liberation war in Algeria. See for example, Martin-Criado (2008) and Bourdieu (2008).