

# BOURDIEU'S CLASS THEORY

*The Academic as Revolutionary*

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Pierre Bourdieu was a universal intellectual whose work ranges from highly abstract, quasi-philosophical explorations to survey research, and whose enormous contemporary influence is only comparable to that previously enjoyed by Sartre or Foucault. Born in 1930 in a small provincial town in southwestern France where his father was the local postman, he made his way to the pinnacle of the French academic establishment, the *École Normale Supérieure* (ENS), receiving the *agrégation* in philosophy in 1955. Unlike many other *normaliens* of his generation, Bourdieu did not join the Communist Party, although his close collaborator Jean-Claude Passeron did form part of a heterodox communist cell organized by Michel Foucault, and Bourdieu was clearly influenced by Althusserian Marxism in this period.<sup>1</sup>

Following his *agrégation*, Bourdieu's original plan was to produce a thesis under the direction of the eminent philosopher of science and historical epistemologist Georges Canguilhem. But his philosophical career was interrupted by the draft. The young scholar was sent to Algeria, evidently as

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<sup>1</sup> David Swartz, *Culture and Power: The Sociology of Pierre Bourdieu* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 20.

punishment for his anticolonial politics,<sup>2</sup> where he performed military service for a year and subsequently decided to stay on as a lecturer in the Faculty of Letters at Algiers.<sup>3</sup>

Bourdieu's Algerian experience was decisive for his later intellectual formation; here he turned away from epistemology and toward fieldwork, producing two masterful ethnographic studies: *Sociologie de l'Algérie* and *Esquisse d'une théorie de la pratique*. The young scholar's opposition to the Algerian war, however, put him in danger, and in 1959 he returned to France, assuming a post as a teaching assistant to Raymond Aron in 1961.<sup>4</sup>

In 1964 Aron called on Bourdieu to administer his Ford Foundation-funded Center for Historical Sociology, and in the following years Bourdieu gathered around himself a Pleiades of collaborators (Luc Boltanski, Yvette Delsaut, Claude Grignon, Jean-Claude Passeron, and Monique de Saint-Martin) who would help him establish an extraordinarily powerful and productive school. During this period Bourdieu turned his attention to the French educational system, producing (with Jean-Claude Passeron) a pair of works on the reproductive function of education: *Les héritiers, les étudiants, et la culture* and *La reproduction*.

Bourdieu broke with Aron in 1968 in response to the latter's conservative condemnation of the student protests of that year. During the later sixties and early seventies, Bourdieu laid the foundations for his dominant position in French sociology, publishing a huge variety of works touching on substantive theoretical and methodological questions. In 1975 he founded the Actes de la Recherche en Sciences Sociales, which became a factory for Bourdieu's own work and that of his students. By the late seventies and early eighties, his major mature works had appeared: *La distinction: critique sociale du jugement*, *Homo academicus*, *La noblesse état*, and *Les règles de l'art*, among many others.

During the 1990s Bourdieu radicalized, becoming the organic intellectual of the *gauche de la gauche*, in which capacity he produced *La misère du monde*, a massive series of interviews documenting the ravages of neoliberalism on the lives of everyday people. Given this intellectual and political profile, it is quite understandable that Bourdieu would be an unavoidable point of

2 David Swartz, *Symbolic Power, Politics, and Intellectuals* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2013), 195.

3 Swartz, *Culture and Power*, 22.

4 Swartz, *Symbolic Power*, 196.

reference for the contemporary intellectual left: a brilliant and indefatigable sociologist who combines the intellectual sophistication of Lévi-Strauss or Jean-Paul Sartre with the empirical rigor of Anglo-American survey research and ethnography while also carrying on the venerable French tradition of the engaged intellectual, especially toward the end of his life. Indeed, the social theory that he has singlehandedly created is to the contemporary intellectual left what neo-Marxism was to the students of the 1960s.

Distinctively, however, Bourdieu, while attractive to the avant-garde, also appeals to the stolid mainstream of American social science, whose tolerance for French imports is usually quite limited. What explains this strikingly broad appeal? This essay will consider two accounts: the view that Bourdieu's is a grand sociological theory (or what I will refer to hereafter as a macrosociological theory) like those of Marx, Weber, or Durkheim, and a contrasting view that Bourdieu's sociology resonates with the social conditions that characterize elite academics, especially in the United States.

Macrosociological theories are distinguished by their explanatory ambition. In particular they have three characteristics: They link structural divisions in society to observable behaviors; they develop explanations for why, given those divisions, societies can reproduce themselves; and they sketch the processes through which societies change. When successful, these theories thus offer some account of stratification, reproduction, and social change. Marx's theories of class conflict and mode of production, Weber's sociology of domination, and Durkheim's accounts of the division of labor, anomie, and social solidarity are all macrosociological theories in this sense. Bourdieu's work also presents itself as just such a theory, but a close examination of his work reveals that his explanations are often tautological or weak. Indeed, this essay strongly endorses Philip Gorski's recent claim that "Bourdieu's oeuvre does not contain a general theory of social change."<sup>5</sup> This, I argue, poses a puzzle: If Bourdieu's sociology is largely nonexplanatory, his current popularity cannot be accounted for by the power of its macrosociology.

I then turn to a second account suggesting that Bourdieu's appeal is based on the unmatched ability of his work to articulate the experiences and political

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<sup>5</sup> Philip S. Gorski, "Bourdieu as a Theorist of Change," in *Bourdieu and Historical Analysis*, edited by Philip S. Gorski (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), 13.

hopes of elite academics in the contemporary period. I identify three features of Bourdieu's sociology that render it attractive to this group. First, like network analysis, its basic social ontology resonates with the lived experience of elite academics, who are the main consumers of this social theory. Second, Bourdieu's sociology holds out the possibility of political relevance to an intelligentsia with little organizational link to popular forces. In particular, Bourdieu's account of symbolic power promises a transformation of the social world through a transformation of the categories through which the social world is understood. Social change can thus be achieved without identifying an external nonacademic agent that might carry that change forward. In a period in which such a social agent is far from apparent, the appeal of shortcut politics of this sort is obvious. Third, Bourdieu's sociology offers a high-powered defense of the privileges of academic life. A considerable part of Bourdieu's political energy was devoted to defending the autonomy of the academy: in an earlier period, its autonomy from politics; in a later period, its autonomy from the economy. His sociology, therefore, can simultaneously appeal to the reformist impulses of sociology's "engaged" wing and the conservative impulses of its professional one.

### BOURDIEU'S SOCIOLOGY CONSIDERED AS A MACROSOCIOLOGICAL THEORY

Before delving into the analysis, it is necessary to introduce Bourdieu's basic terminology. Although it may seem abstract, it is, unfortunately, indispensable for understanding his work. There are four central concepts in Bourdieu's sociology: capital, habitus, fields, and symbolic power.

*Capital* refers to resources. Bourdieu identifies three main varieties: economic (understood basically as income and ownership), social (basically understood as connections), and cultural (informal education, cultural objects, and credentials). These can be measured in two dimensions: quantity and structure. Thus, particular agents may possess more or less total amounts of capital, and this capital may be structured in different proportions. Accordingly, although two "agents" may have the same total overall amount of capital, one might have a greater proportion of cultural capital and the other of economic capital.<sup>6</sup> Generally, the volume and structure of capital

<sup>6</sup> Rogers Brubaker, "Rethinking Classical Theory: The Sociological Vision of Pierre Bourdieu," *Theory and Society* 14, no. 6 (1985): 745–75, esp. 765–66; Mathieu Hikaru Desan,

determines one's "position in social space" or class position. The primary class division in Bourdieu's scheme is between those with high and low total capital, but within each of these classes there is a further difference between those with a greater proportion of either economic or cultural capital. The concept of capital is thus supposed to provide a map of the main social divisions in contemporary society.

*Habitus* is a set of preconscious dispositions, including tastes, a sense of the self, bodily stances, and, crucially, skills or "practical mastery." The habitus is established primarily in the family, but in "differentiated" societies the school also plays a key role. In general, habitus produces patterns of behavior that reproduce the social agent in the position he or she currently occupies.<sup>7</sup> More specifically, habitus translates different class positions, specified by different forms of capital, into observable behavior.

*Fields* are agonistic social games in which agents struggle with one another over some socially defined stake, such as profit or prestige. Although there are an unspecified number of such fields, the economic field, the political field, and the field of cultural production are among the most important. Bourdieu sees social reality as made up fundamentally of fields, and social action as action in fields. The consequences of the general use of this metaphor are profound, and I examine them in detail in the subsequent section.

The final pillar of Bourdieu's sociology is the concept of *symbolic power*. Symbolic power derives from the misrecognition of historically contingent social relations, especially the rules that govern particular fields, as if they were given by nature.<sup>8</sup> This misrecognition of the arbitrary character of the rules that govern fields is a crucial element in Bourdieu's theory of reproduction.

To summarize, Bourdieu's general conceptual scheme is this: one's resources (capital) produce a character structure (habitus) that generates

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"Bourdieu, Marx, and Capital: A Critique of the Extension Model," *Sociological Theory* 31, no. 4 (2013): 318–42, esp. 325.

7 Pierre Bourdieu and Monique de Saint-Martin, "Anatomie du gout," *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* 2, no. 5 (1976): 2–81, esp. 18. The fullest definition comes in Pierre Bourdieu, *Esquisse d'une théorie de la pratique* (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1972), 178–79, where Bourdieu writes that habitus is to be "understood as a system of durable and transposable dispositions which, integrating all past experiences, functions in every moment as a matrix of perceptions, appreciations and actions, and makes possible the accomplishment of an infinity of tasks, thanks to analogical transfers of schemes permitting the resolution of problems having the same form." For the notion of habitus as practical mastery, see Pierre Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991), 142–46.

8 Pierre Bourdieu, "Rethinking the State: Genesis and Structure of the Bureaucratic Field," *Sociological Theory* 12, no. 1 (1994): 1–19, esp. 14; see also "Rethinking Classical Theory," 754–55.

particular sorts of behavior in the contexts of particular social games (fields). These contexts are then stably reproduced, because the process that links capital, habitus, and field together is systematically distorted by lay understandings that serve to legitimate the existing unequal distribution of resources (symbolic power). Bourdieu uses these concepts to develop an account of stratification, social reproduction, and social change. His ambition is then to develop a social theory of the same range and power as the classical social theories of Marx, Durkheim, and Weber. Does he succeed?

### CAPITAL AND HABITUS: A NEW THEORY OF CLASS?

One of Bourdieu's fundamental claims is that habitus, understood as a system of dispositions, appreciations, and practical mastery, is the product of class position, and more specifically the product of the volume and structure of capital that agents possess.<sup>9</sup> The habitus is a preconscious framework or "generative mechanism" that operates in an analogous way in a wide variety of different contexts<sup>10</sup> and therefore shapes a huge variety of behaviors. Habitus provides the basic frameworks of cultural tastes;<sup>11</sup> it embodies a fund of tacit knowledge<sup>12</sup> and even shapes orientations to the body. As Bourdieu writes, "Habitus produces individual and collective practices, thus history, that conforms to the schemas engendered by history."<sup>13</sup> His claim therefore is that there is a close connection between this deep and powerful schema and class position. Accordingly, it should be possible to demonstrate that differ-

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9 Pierre Bourdieu, *Le sens pratique* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1980), 93. Here Bourdieu says that habitus is "the product of a determinant class of regularities." In *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 101, Bourdieu states that "the dispositions ... derive from ... position in economic space."

10 Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 101; Bourdieu and Saint-Martin, "Anatomie," 19.

11 Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 87. In this text Bourdieu describes the formation of the habitus in a situation without a specialized system of education as "pervasive pedagogic action" that creates "practical mastery." In his later *Pascalian Meditations*, he writes that, "In so far as it is the product of the incorporation of a *nomos*, of the principle of visions and division constitutive of a social order or field, habitus generates practices immediately adjusted to that order, which are therefore perceived by their author and also by others as 'right,' straight, adroit, adequate, without being in any way the product of obedience to an order in the sense of an imperative, to a norm or to legal rules" (143).

12 There is a good summary in Swartz, *Culture and Power*, 101–102.

13 Bourdieu, *Le sens pratique*, 91.

ent habitus are the result of different “volumes” and “structures of capital” possessed by agents in specific fields.

A privileged empirical domain for studying habitus is taste, because tastes make dispositions and schemas of appreciation tangible. Thus, as a way of empirically demonstrating the connection between class and habitus, Bourdieu attempts to demonstrate a connection between class position and differences in aesthetic tastes.<sup>14</sup> His work in this area, however, suffers from two problems. Bourdieu fails either to specify either an empirically tractable meaning of the term “class,” or to show any compelling evidence for the existence of “habitus” in the sense of a “generative mechanism” that can be applied to numerous domains. This is most evident in the book that many consider to be his masterpiece, *La distinction* (*Distinction*, in English).

One would expect a book about class and taste such as *La distinction* to begin with a conceptualization of class. Bourdieu’s general thesis is that the dominant class, defined loosely as consisting of those high in cultural and economic capital, has a “taste for freedom” expressed in its aestheticizing and detached relationship to culture, while the dominated class, consisting of those low in total capital, has a “taste for necessity” expressed in an attachment to concrete and tangible objects.<sup>15</sup> These claims are very ambiguous. One problem is that Bourdieu inflates the notion of class in *La distinction* to such an extent that he undermines its usefulness as a concept for empirical research. Thus, he writes:

Social class is not defined by a property (not even the most determinant one, such as the volume and composition of capital) nor by a collection of properties (of sex, age, social origin, ethnic origin — proportion of blacks and whites, for examples, or natives and immigrants — income, education level, etc.), nor even by a chain of properties strung out from a fundamental property (position in the relations of production) in a relation of cause and effect, conditioner and conditioned; but by the structure of relations between all the pertinent properties which gives its specific value to each of them and to the effects they exert on practices.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Bourdieu and Saint-Martin, “Anatomie,” 19.

<sup>15</sup> Swartz, *Culture and Power*, 166–67.

<sup>16</sup> Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 105.

A similar statement appears in an earlier preparatory study coauthored with his collaborator Monique de Saint-Martin: “The variations according to class or class fractions of the practices and of the tastes that they reveal (see figures 1 and 2) are organized according to a structure that is homologous to the variations of economic and scholastic capital and to social trajectory.”<sup>17</sup> It is worth parsing both of these passages a bit. In the first, Bourdieu says that social class is not “defined” by any particular property but rather by “the structure of relations between all the pertinent properties.” But he never explains which “structures of relations” produce which classes. Furthermore, although he invokes “pertinent properties,” he provides no account of what “pertinent properties” are to be used to distinguish classes, so invoking relations among them is not particularly enlightening.

The second passage is equally troubling. Bourdieu here adds two new and untheorized dimensions to class: *scholastic capital* and *trajectory*. But their relationship to economic and cultural capital, his main dimensions of social division, is not explained. For example, it is never clear whether scholastic capital is a form of cultural capital or a separate type of capital altogether. Is it possible, for example, to have little culture capital but lots of scholastic capital? In any case, to make sense of this, the reader is referred to “figures 1 and 2,” which also famously reappear in *La distinction* as the “space of social positions” and the “space of life-styles.”<sup>18</sup> These figures appear to show a correspondence between tastes and class in the Bourdieusian sense, but since they have been constructed according to the capacious definition of class above, they cannot demonstrate this. The figures contain information about numbers of children, hours worked per week, and the size of the town the “class” comes from, as well as whether the occupational groups in question are expanding or contracting demographically (indicated by arrows), none of which clearly has to do with “class” in the sense that Bourdieu conceptualizes it or in any other sense.

Bourdieu’s attempt to explain habitus as a result of class is thus vitiated by a basic conceptual weakness. He does not explain how his indicators of “class” connect to his theoretical class map. Thus, his scheme of the space of social positions contains a series of seemingly irrelevant (from the point of view of class analysis) social differences. This creates a serious problem for his

<sup>17</sup> Bourdieu and Saint-Martin, “Anatomie,” 14.

<sup>18</sup> Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 128–29.

work on class and tastes because, in the absence of a clear concept of class, any difference in taste along any social dimension recorded in his surveys becomes evidence of a class difference in habitus. Paradoxically, then, for a book often considered a classic of sociological theory, *La distinction* suffers from a common error of empiricist social research: the concepts and indicators Bourdieu uses collapse into one another, so that any array of evidence would seem to be compatible with his argument. Bourdieu's theory of class and habitus, then, lacks empirical content in the technical sense that it is unclear what evidence is imaginably incompatible or inconsistent with his account. The claim that class position determines habitus is thus quite similar to the statement Karl Popper famously cited as an example of a nonempirical statement: "It will rain or not rain here tomorrow."<sup>19</sup> By being compatible with all conceivable evidence, Bourdieu's account undermines its explanatory status.

At times Bourdieu seems to try to solve this problem by resorting to the tautological claim that habitus is in fact an indicator of class rather than an outcome of it. There is a conceptual warrant for this claim in much of his work. Bourdieu often discusses habitus as an internalization of class position and, in his work on capital, speaks of habitus as an embodied form of capital.<sup>20</sup> In this case, presumably, differences in taste would themselves be an indicator of "class habitus."<sup>21</sup> Thus Gorski states that "in Bourdieu's view, social position [class] influences individual disposition [habitus], and vice versa [!], *ad infinitum*, if not in wholly determinate or ineluctable fashion."<sup>22</sup> But this would obviously presume the "classness" of habitus, which is precisely what Bourdieu's analysis is supposed to demonstrate. To define habitus as an "embodiment" of class is to undermine the explanatory agenda of attempting to demonstrate a relationship between them.

These problems of conceptualization are not abstract theoretical concerns. They introduce deep ambiguity into the specifics of Bourdieu's evidence. For example, among Bourdieu's strongest pieces of evidence is a table showing differences in the percentage of respondents who described

19 Karl Popper, *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1968), 40–41.

20 Pierre Bourdieu, "The Forms of Capital," in *Readings in Economic Sociology*, edited by Nicole Woolsey Biggart (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2002), 280–91, esp. 282–83.

21 Brubaker, "Rethinking Classical Social Theory," 767.

22 Philip S. Gorski, "Nation-ization Struggles: A Bourdieusian Theory of Nationalism," in *Bourdieu and Historical Analysis*, 254.

certain objects as potentially constituting a “nice photo.” Bourdieu divided respondents into three “classes” or clusters of occupations. These were: the popular classes, the middle classes (artisans, white-collar workers, technicians, and the “new petit-bourgeoisie”), and the higher classes (independent employers, engineers, liberal professions, and professors). The results of the table were suggestive, showing that only 1 percent of artisans found that an automobile accident might make a nice photo, while 17 percent of professors and artistic producers had this view. Similarly, while 37 percent of educators and artistic producers thought that cabbages might make a nice photo, only 7 percent of the working-class respondents thought this.<sup>23</sup>

In explaining this pattern, Bourdieu states that the “capacity to think as beautiful or better as susceptible to an aesthetic transformation ... is strongly tied to cultural capital inherited or *scholastically acquired*” (my emphasis).<sup>24</sup> Note the symptomatic slippage between “inheritance” and “scholastic acquisition.” It cannot be sufficiently stressed that only the first of these interpretations is consistent with Bourdieu’s concept of habitus as determined (in part) by “cultural capital.” This is because class habitus is not something acquired in a secondary educational process. Indeed, in an earlier work Bourdieu specifically rejects the notion that the habitus can be fundamentally altered in education; schools, according to him, largely transmit preexisting differences in the “primary habitus” created by early socialization.<sup>25</sup> Therefore, “scholastically acquired cultural capital” is not really cultural capital at all: it is simply schooling. Bourdieu’s evidence from the photographs, then, although among the strongest pieces of data in *La distinction*, is hardly decisive since it is compatible with two entirely different, and indeed fundamentally opposed, explanations of the pattern of responses.<sup>26</sup> It is quite

23 Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 526.

24 Bourdieu and Saint-Martin, “Anatomie,” 24.

25 Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron, *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture* (London: Sage, 1977), 43. Here the authors argue that schools reproduce inequalities because to succeed in them students’ early pedagogical experiences (which they call “primary habitus”) must match the pedagogical expectations of the school: “The success of all school education ... depends fundamentally on the education previously accomplished in the earliest years of life, even and especially when the educational system denies this primacy in its ideology and practice by making the school career a history with no pre-history.”

26 Paul Dimaggio and Michael Useem, “Social Class and Arts Consumption: The Origins and Consequences of Class Differences in Exposure to the Arts in America,” *Theory and Society* 5, no. 2 (1978): 141–61, esp. 147–48, provides an account of the relationship between class and taste along the lines of this second interpretation. The authors argue that class

possible that Bourdieu's survey evidence is profoundly at odds with the theory of habitus, because what the evidence may show is the importance of pedagogy rather than class background.<sup>27</sup>

Furthermore, the entire notion of a coherent habitus, determined by class or otherwise, is not well supported by Bourdieu's evidence. To recall, the habitus cannot be indicated by differences in one particular domain of tastes. Since it is a "generative mechanism," it should produce similar differences across a wide variety of domains. In support of this point, Bourdieu presents evidence not only on tastes but also on the frequencies of various activities: "Do-It-Yourself," "Photography," "Records," "Painting," "Musical Instrument," "Louvre and Modern Art Gallery," "Light Music," and "News." Bourdieu's evidence here demonstrates some intriguing differences. Thus, while 63 percent of the working class reported "Do-It-Yourself" activities often, only 40 percent of the upper class did so. Similarly, while 16 percent of the educators and artistic producers reported painting, only 4 percent of the working-class respondents did so.<sup>28</sup>

But it is simply not the case that Bourdieu's survey evidence suggests similar differences in tastes across widely varied domains, or even within single domains of taste. Thus, in the area of cultural activities, the evidence shows that museum attendance is strongly shaped by "class" (in the loose sense of occupational groupings), but photography and home movies showed relatively little class difference with 50 percent of the working class engaged in this activity, compared with 59 percent of the middle classes and 65 percent of the upper classes.<sup>29</sup>

Even within highly focused areas, like taste in movies, the idea of a single transposable class habitus does not seem to be supported. For example, a survey of "movies seen" that divided the respondents into four categories ("social and medical services," "junior commercial executives and secretar-

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differences in taste are largely a result of differential access to education.

27 Paul Dimaggio, "On Pierre Bourdieu," *American Journal of Sociology* 84, no. 6 (May 1979), 1460-74, esp. 1468, has pointed out that Bourdieu offers no real evidence on habitus at all: "Bourdieu suggests the myriad ways in which socialization can, in general, form deep structures of personality and perception. But since he does not establish empirically the relationship between social class and early childhood experience, it seems premature to allege that the *habitus* of different social classes are *fundamentally* different."

28 Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 532.

29 *Ibid.*, 532.

ies,” “office workers,” and “small shopkeepers and craftsmen” — categories, again, only distantly related to Bourdieu’s theory) found that preferences differed across these groups for some films (*The Trial*, *Vice and Virtue*, and *Salvatore Giuliano*). However, other films in the same survey were appreciated by all four occupational groupings.<sup>30</sup>

This brief discussion of Bourdieu’s evidence suggests that it is insufficient to support his claim that there existed distinctive “class habitus” in France in the 1960s and 1970s. On some very specific items there were differences, but these may have had as much to do with access to education, free time, and resources as the deep, generative schema of “class habitus.” Indeed, Bourdieu shows little evidence of a consistent and transposable habitus of any sort operating similarly across different cultural activities. Instead, certain sorts of activities and tastes seem relevant to class, others much less so.

As one of Bourdieu’s most perceptive interlocutors puts the point, “Occupation [in *La*] is correlated with consumption habits and with indicators of dispositions, but often quite weakly.”<sup>31</sup> In short, Bourdieu produces very little evidence to show that different classes as specified by differential possession of cultural and economic capital produced different habitus. Not only do the occupational categories in his surveys have an indeterminate relationship to his concept of class, his empirical evidence on habitus does not persuasively indicate that a unified “generative mechanism” of taste exists at all.

The discussion up to this point has presumed that Bourdieu’s main project in *La distinction* and his related studies was to show that habitus was rooted in class differences. But he simultaneously puts forward a second, very different account. After the first half of the book lays out the theory of habitus and attempts to document it, chapter six opens with the disconcerting claim that “the different social classes differ not so much in the extent to which they acknowledge culture as in the extent to which they know it.”<sup>32</sup> This difference between knowledge (*connaissance*) and acknowledgment (*reconnaissance*) forms the basis for the “cultural goodwill” that Bourdieu holds to be characteristic of the petit-bourgeoisie. Basically, his argument here is that a wide range of middlebrow tastes are oriented to the search for substitutes for legitimate high culture. This leads to a particularly high rate of consumption of “pretentious”

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 361.

<sup>31</sup> Brubaker, “Rethinking Classical Social Theory,” 766–67.

<sup>32</sup> Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 318. Bourdieu and Saint-Martin make the same point in “Anatomie,” 36.

cultural objects, objects that pretend to be something other than they are: kitchenettes as opposed to kitchens, stamp collections as opposed to art collections, decorated corners as opposed to rooms.<sup>33</sup>

Bourdieu continues this style of analysis when he argues that the working-class habitus is marked by an “acceptance of domination,” evidenced not only by “the absence of luxury goods” but also by “the presence of numerous cheap substitutes for these rare goods, ‘sparkling white wine’ for champagne, imitation leather for real leather, reproductions for paintings.” These, according to Bourdieu, are “indices of a dispossession at the second power, which accepts the definition of the goods worthy of being possessed.”<sup>34</sup>

These passages have provoked intense criticism as being “patronizing” and for running against considerable evidence of the cultural autonomy of the working class.<sup>35</sup> What has been less noticed is how profoundly at odds Bourdieu’s analysis of cultural good will is with his previous account of class habitus. In fact, all of his writings on culture are marked by two formally incompatible claims: on the one hand, that each class, or more broadly, social group, has *its own* habitus and therefore *its own* schemas of perception and appreciation (tastes); on the other, that the petit-bourgeoisie and working class are dominated by the schemas and perceptions of the dominant class. Evidently, however, in order to be culturally dominated, the petit-bourgeoisie and the working class must share at least some elements of the habitus of the dominant class, since one of the key elements of habitus is precisely those “categories of perception and appreciation”<sup>36</sup> through which particular cultural objects come to be acknowledged as legitimate. If different classes really had different habitus, as is suggested in Bourdieu’s first position, there could be no relations of cultural dominance among them. Each class would simply inhabit a parallel symbolic universe with its own “values.” Conversely, if relations of cultural domination exist among classes, they must share broadly the same habitus. To assert both arguments simultaneously is incoherent.

Bourdieu’s account of the connection between habitus and class, to

33 Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 251–253 and Bourdieu and Saint-Martin, “Anatomie,” 37.

34 Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 386.

35 Jeffrey C. Alexander, *Fin de Siècle Social Theory: Relativism, Reduction and the Problem of Reason* (New York: Verso, 1995), 178.

36 Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 101.

summarize, suffers from three basic problems. First, since Bourdieu offers no clear conceptualization of class, it is unclear how the differences of taste he finds relate to class differences in any sense. Second, even accepting that the occupational categories he uses *do* represent classes in some way, the patterns he finds are incompatible with the theory of habitus. Bourdieu presents no evidence that his respondents possess a “generative mechanism” that can be seen operating in widely different domains of culture. In fact, his evidence points in the opposite direction: that some very specific forms of cultural practice are strongly linked to some occupational groups while others are not. Third, Bourdieu is in fact implicitly working with two incompatible models of the relationship between culture and class, one that conceives of habitus as stratified by class and another that conceives of them as shared across classes. Thus, in one basic sense, Bourdieu’s sociology does not succeed as a macrosociological theory because he fails to link underlying social-structural divisions to observable behavior.

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### MISRECOGNITION AND THE SCHOOL SYSTEM: BOURDIEU’S ACCOUNT OF REPRODUCTION

I now turn to evaluating Bourdieu’s work along the second dimension: his account of social reproduction. Bourdieu, of course, acknowledges the pervasive class inequality of modern capitalism. This imposes a problem very familiar to the tradition of western Marxism. Given the obvious inequalities and injustices of contemporary capitalism, how is it possible that such societies can stably reproduce themselves over time?<sup>37</sup> Bourdieu’s answer to this undeniably real puzzle is symbolic power, which can be best grasped as, in Mara Loveman’s words, “the ability to make appear as natural, inevitable, and thus apolitical that which is a product of historical struggle.”<sup>38</sup> Bourdieu’s account of symbolic power closely parallels the French Marxist Louis Althusser’s theory of ideology.<sup>39</sup> Bourdieu, like Althusser, claims that the misrecognition of the social world is a precondition for action; there-

37 Pierre Bourdieu, *Sur l’État: cours au Collège de France (1989–1992)* (Paris: Seuil, 2012), 259.

38 Mara Loveman, “The Modern State and the Primitive Accumulation of Symbolic Power,” *American Journal of Sociology* 110, no. 6 (2005): 1651–83, esp. 1655.

39 Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1970), 164.

fore, a false, imaginary, or incorrect understanding of the social world is the universal default condition of actors in capitalist society. Furthermore, like Althusser, he emphasizes that this condition of universal misrecognition is reinforced through the education system. Therefore, the school is the central institutional mechanism of social reproduction under capitalism. To consider this account of social reproduction, it is necessary first to get a general sense of why Bourdieu thinks misrecognition is universal.

Bourdieu sees misrecognition as universal because, as noted earlier, he sees society as made up of a set of competitive games called fields. Each field, just like a game, has its own rules and stakes. Thus, for example, the field of the economy is defined by a competitive struggle among firms for profits. But there is also a field of cultural production, an intellectual field, and a field of political power. Each such field has stakes analogous to profits, such as intellectual prestige or political power.<sup>40</sup> The ubiquity of fields undergirds the ubiquity of misrecognition; in order to be a player in a game, one cannot constantly question the rules of the game by pointing out their arbitrary and historically constructed quality. To question the rules of the game would mean no longer to play but rather to observe.<sup>41</sup> In Bourdieu's conception, players in games misrecognize the arbitrary character of the rules that govern their action in that they take them as unquestionable givens. To summarize, if to be a social actor is to be like a player in a game, and to be a player in a game requires submission to the arbitrary rules of the game, then action implies misrecognition. Granted, there are ambiguous elements to this explanation of misrecognition. (Does playing basketball really require that one suppress the realization that the rules of the game are an arbitrary product of history?) But the truly fundamental question is different: Are agonistic games (fields) a good metaphor for social life in general?<sup>42</sup>

It is striking how rarely this question has been posed, given the enormous amount of energy scholars have devoted to defining fields, clarifying ambiguities in Bourdieu's usage of the term, and deploying the notion in empirical work. The ludic metaphor that underlies the idea of the field and

40 Pierre Bourdieu, *Homo Academicus* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988), 11; Jeffrey J. Sallaz and Jane Zavisca, "Bourdieu in American Sociology, 1980–2004," *Annual Review of Sociology* 33 (2007): 21–41, esp. 24.

41 Bourdieu, *Le sens pratique*, 56–57.

42 For a penetrating critique of the application of a ludic metaphor to society, see Perry Anderson, *Arguments within English Marxism* (London: Verso), 56–57.

its corollary of universal misrecognition remains an unexamined assumption within much of the literature on Bourdieu and influenced by him.

One general problem with the ludic or field view of the social is that there are many zones of social life that are not configured like games. One of these is the world of labor, in the sense of material transformation and creation. Even in the most exploitative and alienated conditions, labor involves a collective effort at transformation and is therefore oriented toward a project, not toward “stance-taking” or “distinction” in a field. Furthermore, it is not clear why participation in the labor process would require misrecognition as submission to the rules of the game, as in Bourdieu’s fields. Indeed, effective labor processes, as both Marx and Weber clearly understood, require constant, reflexive monitoring of the consequences of various courses of action.

Another key type of action which would seem to escape the field metaphor is social movements, especially revolutionary social movements, which are often explicitly oriented to identifying and challenging previously unacknowledged rules of the social game. Just as in the case of labor, social action here would seem to require a *break* with misrecognition rather than submission to it.

A final type of social interaction outside of the field metaphor is interaction oriented to communication. Again, this sort of social structure cannot be understood as a field of competition in the Bourdieusian sense because mutual understanding is a result of mutual and sympathetic interpretation, not agonistic distinction.

All of this suggests that Bourdieu’s theory of social reproduction is highly questionable to the extent that it depends on the universalization of the ludic/field metaphor. There is little reason to think competitive games, and the necessary misrecognition that occurs in them according to Bourdieu, exhaust the totality of social relations; as a consequence, it seems implausible that symbolic power as misrecognition can work as a general account of social reproduction.

Bourdieu offers, in addition to the general idea of misrecognition, a more specific and institutionally rooted theory of reproduction focusing on the education system. He posits a fundamental transformation in modern society from a mode of “family reproduction” to one of “school reproduction.” In the family mode of reproduction, resources and property are passed down through the family. In the school mode of reproduction, they are at least

partially invested in an education that then provides the inheritor with a certificate. Bourdieu argues that this second mode provides much greater legitimacy to the dominant classes than the family mode, and that this legitimacy increases to the extent that the education system itself becomes increasingly autonomous from the direct control of the dominant economic class.<sup>43</sup> As Bourdieu and Passeron put the argument:

Nothing is better designed than the examination to inspire universal recognition of the legitimacy of academic verdicts and of the social hierarchies they legitimate, since it leads the self-eliminated to count themselves among those who fail, while enabling those elected from among a small number of eligible candidates to see in their election the proof of a merit or “gift” which would have caused them to be preferred to all comers in any circumstances.<sup>44</sup>

Schooling and examinations thus translate class inequalities into inequalities of merit, legitimating these inequalities both in the eyes of the dominant and subordinate classes. According to Bourdieu, to a large extent the dominant class of contemporary class of contemporary is a credentialed elite.<sup>45</sup> To recall, this is also Althusser’s argument: that the school ISA is the key institution in reproducing capitalism.

It is beyond the scope of this article to fully engage with the debates about the role of schooling in capitalist reproduction. Two points are worth making, however. The first is that Bourdieu’s account of reproduction through schooling is heavily dependent on the French case. The French school system, with its enormous prestige and relatively high degree of autonomy from the business class, is closely associated with the particular dynamics of French social development, characterized as it has been since at least 1789 by a powerful and centralized state staffed by a highly educated bureaucratic cadre and a relatively lackluster industrial capitalism. Thus, although it may be true that credentials play an absolutely crucial role in legitimating capitalist social relations in France given this particular pattern

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43 Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron, *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1990), 152–53; Pierre Bourdieu, *The State Nobility: Elite Schools in the Field of Power* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), 383.

44 Bourdieu and Passeron, *Reproduction*, 162.

45 Bourdieu and Passeron, *Reproduction*, 166–67; Bourdieu, *The State Nobility*, 384–85.

of development, there is little reason to see this as a general phenomenon.<sup>46</sup> However, capitalist reproduction certainly *is* a general phenomenon, rendering doubtful an invocation of the school system as an adequate explanation for capitalist reproduction as such. US capitalism, both the leading and archetypical case, stands as the disconfirming instance. There has been little correlation, even at the highest levels, between winning out in competition, the *sine qua non* for capitalist success, and educational attainment among business owners/entrepreneurs. Indeed, the culture of the US capitalist class has tended to be dismissive of formal university training compared to practical industrial experience; but this has had little negative consequence for capital's legitimacy in the US.

The second problem with Bourdieu's account of reproduction is more analytical. Although the question of social reproduction really has meaning only in the context of a theory of capitalism as intrinsically conflict-ridden, unequal, and unstable, Bourdieu has never theorized capitalism. In fact, the term *capitalism*, in contrast to *capital*, appears almost nowhere in his work. This lacuna weakens his account of reproduction, because he fails to see that there are very good material reasons for direct producers to support capitalists independently of the education system or misrecognition.<sup>47</sup> Because capitalist profits are the condition for economic growth and employment, it is possible for it to be in the material interests of individual workers or groups of workers to support profits and, *a fortiori*, capitalist property relations. As a consequence, capitalism, much more than other systems of production, possesses a potential "material basis of consent" — independently of any other mechanisms.<sup>48</sup>

Finally, Bourdieu's neglect of electoral democracy as a potential mechanism of social reproduction is also noteworthy. Democracy, to begin with, in the basic Schumpeterian sense of an institutional system for establishing an alternation of political elites, is almost completely absent from Bourdieu's

46 Fritz Ringer, *Fields of Knowledge: French Academic Culture in Comparative Perspective* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 55: "The development of secondary and higher education in France and Germany during the nineteenth century was not directly and functionally linked to economic growth."

47 For an exemplary account, see Vivek Chibber, "Rescuing Class from the Cultural Turn," *Catalyst* 1 (Spring 2017).

48 Adam Przeworski, *Capitalism and Social Democracy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 138–39.

work.<sup>49</sup> In his monumental lecture course *Sur l'État*, Bourdieu mentions democracy in passing in his discussion of public opinion, in his very brief summary of the work of Barrington Moore, and as an ideology of American imperialism.<sup>50</sup> In other work, he develops the idea of the political field, and a sophisticated account of the relationship between party leaders and followers.<sup>51</sup> But even in his seminal article on political representation, where one might expect a discussion of party systems, voting, and parliaments, there is almost no analysis of these issues; instead, his discussion turns upon the idea that the represented are expropriated of their means of political representation.<sup>52</sup> Indeed, even a highly sympathetic observer admits that his work has mostly ignored the standard topics of political sociology, limiting his impact in this field.<sup>53</sup>

This neglect of democracy is particularly surprising because elections would seem far more directly related to the legitimation of political authority than the school system;<sup>54</sup> indeed, elections are a key example of the lengthening of the “chains of legitimization”<sup>55</sup> he understands as crucial to the stability of modern political order. Elections institute a quasi-fictive political equality that masks real inequalities and makes states appear as the expression of a nation constituted of formally equal citizens. In elections individuals do not appear as members of social classes or other interest groups.<sup>56</sup> Thus, elections

49 Adam Przeworski, *Democracy and the Limits of Self Government* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 27–28; Joseph A. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* (New York: Free Press, 1962), 269.

50 Pierre Bourdieu, *On the State: Lectures at the Collège de France 1989–1992* (Malden, MA: Polity, 2014), 81–82, 159–60.

51 Mustafa Emirbayer and Erik Schneiderhan, “Dewey and Bourdieu on Democracy,” in *Bourdieu and Historical Analysis*, edited by Philip S. Gorski (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), 140–44.

52 Pierre Bourdieu, “La représentation politique,” *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* 36 (1981): 3–24.

53 David Swartz in “Pierre Bourdieu and North American Political Sociology: Why He Doesn’t Fit In but Should,” *French Politics* 4 (2006): 84–89: “Indeed Bourdieu does not devote much attention to public demonstrations, strikes, police, army, prisons, or war. Nor does he devote much attention to those political units, such as legislatures or constitutions, commonly treated as institutions by political scientists. Except for the act of delegating political power, Bourdieu has not devoted much attention to political processes, such as decision making, coalition building, or leadership selection” (87).

54 Bourdieu, *On the State*, 194, 216–19, 259–60.

55 *Ibid.*, 131.

56 Perry Anderson, “The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci,” *New Left Review* 100 (1976–77): 5–78, 28; Göran Therborn, *What Does the Ruling Class Do When It Rules?* (London: Verso,

establish a highly individualized relationship to the state, creating fundamental problems for collective movements aiming to transcend or transform state power and capitalism. Class interests in electoral democracies are delegated to representatives of those interests and neither classes nor masses in general bring direct political pressure to bear on the state.<sup>57</sup>

It would be difficult to argue, then, that Bourdieu offers a compelling account of capitalist reproduction. Insofar as his theory is based on misrecognition, it rests on an implausible extension of the ludic metaphor of the field to all social relations. Insofar as it is based on the school system, it generalizes the specificity of the French case while ignoring the powerful economic and political mechanisms that also operate to stabilize capitalism. Thus Bourdieu's theory does not successfully meet the second criterion of a macrosociological theory. He has no plausible account of social reproduction.

**RELATIVE DEPRIVATION  
AND THE INTELLECTUALS: A BOURDIEUSIAN  
THEORY OF SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION?**

I now turn to Bourdieu's understanding of social transformation. It is necessary to begin by noting that the field metaphor creates severe obstacles to any compelling account of social change, for by reducing social life to an agonistic game it precludes the very possibility of collective and purposive action, since all action is constituted by stance-taking in a field whose rules themselves are treated as unquestioned.<sup>58</sup> Therefore, any account of social change that Bourdieu produces must do without a strong notion of collective agency.

The constraints that the field metaphor places on a theory of transformation are best demonstrated by examining Bourdieu's political sociology, where he extensively deploys it. His central claim about politics is that oppositions among political representatives explain far more about their views than their relations to their electoral or social bases do. To understand any specific political position, therefore, "It is at least as necessary to know the universe of stances offered by the field as it is the demands of the laity (the 'base') of whom

2008), 113.

57 Przeworski, *Capitalism and Social Democracy*, 13–14.

58 Jacques Rancière in *Le philosophe et ses pauvres* (Paris: Flammarion, 2007), 258 points out that Bourdieu's classes are always struggling, but without recognizing that they are in fact classes. The result, he argues, is a "parmenidean Marxism" with classes but without history.

those responsible for taking these positions are the declared representatives: the taking of a position, the word says it marvelously, is an act which has no meaning except relationally, in and by difference, the distinctive gap.”<sup>59</sup> It is thus the differential positions in the field of politics that account for what politicians struggle over. There is an obvious truth to this approach to modern politics, although it is hardly original to Bourdieu.<sup>60</sup>

However, by treating politics as an electoral game or “field,” Bourdieu is woefully unequipped to address the decisive political events that created the modern world and thus must be central to any plausible account of social change: the English Civil War, the American Revolution and Civil War, the French Revolution, German unification, or the Italian Risorgimento. This explanatory blankness is not accidental, nor does it have to do with the absence of appropriate evidence or an aversion to “the philosophy of history,” as Bourdieu himself sometimes suggests. It is, instead, a consequence of the field metaphor. This metaphor can’t be used to explain these revolutionary struggles because they break with the pattern of stance-taking in an established institutional context that is the exclusive domain of Bourdieu’s political sociology. It is no surprise then that there is no Bourdieusian theory of revolution, democratization, or the rise of authoritarianism yet. The types of social processes that produce these outcomes completely transcend intra-field struggles.

Without the mechanism of collective action, Bourdieu is left with two options to explain change, both of which he employs. The first is to invoke the concept of differentiation: “In my elaboration of the notion of field, I have insisted on the process that Durkheim, Weber and Marx described, that is to say, as societies advance in time, they differentiate themselves into special and autonomous universes — that is one of the only tendential laws on which, I think, we can agree.”<sup>61</sup> Leaving aside the absurd notion that Marx and Weber thought differentiation was a “tendential law” requiring no further elaboration, what is striking about this claim is its empty Comtean hubris. In the place of an explanation Bourdieu invokes an agentless master process

59 Bourdieu, “La représentation politique,” 5.

60 Ibid., 22; Pierre Bourdieu, “The Social Space and the Genesis of Groups,” *Theory and Society* 14, no. 6 (1985): 723–44, esp. 740. The first text’s debt to Michels is blindingly obvious. However, as is the case with most of Bourdieu’s intellectual debts, he dismisses the source of his ideas in a footnote.

61 *Sur l’État*, 318.

unfolding “as societies advance in time.” This account of social change is no account at all.

Bourdieu’s second account of change shifts in the other direction from the macro dynamics of differentiation, to agents engaged in a competitive field. In this account, which Bourdieu calls the “hysteresis effect,” social change occurs because actors pursue strategies that are maladapted to the current state of the field in which they are acting. The best example of this second sort of argument is Bourdieu’s analysis of the 1968 crisis. He argues that the crisis was the product of the overproduction of academic degree holders after about 1960, who developed unrealistic career expectations because demographic expansion was driving down the value of their credentials, while their career expectations were aligned to a previous state of the academic field. The French degree holders thus were in the grips of a form of false consciousness. They thought their degrees entitled them to certain positions that would have been available to them in a previous state of the field, but these positions were becoming scarce as more people entered higher education. As a consequence, the degree holders found their degrees to be worth much less than they had expected. This disappointment led them to form an alliance with nonacademic intellectuals and the working class against the educational establishment.<sup>62</sup> The various leftist movements that swept France in this period were the result of a misrecognition in which agents in “homologous” positions in social space (degree holders, nonacademic intellectuals, and the working class) came to understand themselves as similar.<sup>63</sup>

There is both a general theoretical problem with this argument and a serious empirical weakness. The theoretical problem is that it still leaves unexplained why conditions in the field changed — the explosion in the number of degree holders. In the first place, Bourdieu offers no account of why the three sets of actors suddenly found themselves in a “homologous” position. To say that they all experienced relative deprivation at the same time begs the question. The student unrest of 1968 was after all part of a worldwide movement against capitalism and the state that remains outside of Bourdieu’s explanatory framework. It is at least interesting to note that the revolts of the late sixties occurred precisely at the turning point in the world economy

<sup>62</sup> *Homo Academicus*, 162–80.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 175–77; Alexander’s summary in *Fin de Siècle Social Theory*, 147–48, is extremely useful.

from long boom to long downturn, but in Bourdieu's analysis such broader structural factors make no appearance.

Comparatively, too, the analysis is questionable. The Italian sociologist Marzio Barbagli, in a book with uncanny parallels to *Homo Academicus*, argues that an acute situation of intellectual overproduction with respect to positions characterized Italy after unification. In the period after World War I the situation dramatically worsened, as established intellectuals faced the prospect of unemployment after their return from the front while recent degree holders faced diminished career prospects. These dynamics together produced a sense of "relative deprivation," as a rise in expectations created by the war combined fatally with a loss of status or career expectations.<sup>64</sup> But, in a political context characterized by an advancing revolutionary socialist party, intellectuals shifted not to the Left but to the extreme right. In fact, Barbagli argues, many organizations of intellectuals, such as those for engineers and primary-school teachers, took part in violent repressive expeditions against working-class institutions in the early 1920s.<sup>65</sup> In short, Barbagli claims that the very same dynamic that Bourdieu argues produced left-wing radicalization in France in '68 — a sense of relative deprivation with respect to career prospects — led to fascism in Italy.<sup>66</sup>

Since roughly the same process produced different outcomes in these two contexts, a satisfactory explanation of the politicization of intellectuals would seem to require the specification of factors, particularly the orientation of left parties to intellectuals, apart from this effect itself. In sum, Bourdieu's theory of change remains vague. Indeed, what is most striking about it is its banality. One hardly needs Bourdieu in order to come up with a theory of relative deprivation.<sup>67</sup> Furthermore, this theory in any case is insufficient to account for Bourdieu's central political outcome: the left-wing politicization of French academics in the late sixties.

64 Marzio Barbagli, *Educating for Unemployment: Politics, Labor Markets, and the School System—Italy, 1859–1973* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 119.

65 *Ibid.*, 119–22.

66 *Ibid.*, 10. There is still no adequate comparative historical analysis of the dynamics that lead intellectuals to the Right or the Left.

67 Michael Burawoy's gloss in *Conversations with Bourdieu: The Johannesburg Moment* (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2012), remains unsurpassed. There he writes, "This is a repotted version of the theory of relative deprivation that once informed so much social psychology and social movement theory" (39).

Bourdieu's sociology does not therefore constitute a macrosociological theory on any of the three dimensions I identified in the introduction. His class analysis fails to link class structure to a distribution of observable behaviors. Instead, it veers toward to a series of empty tautologies as the meaning of class expands to include any social difference — including, alarmingly, taste itself. His crypto-Althusserian theory of reproduction fails to account for the political and economic dimensions of the problem, while resting on an implausible generalization of the ludic metaphor. Finally, Bourdieu's two accounts of social change (a nineteenth-century-style evolutionism and a “repotted” theory of relative deprivation) are, not surprisingly, unconvincing.

These explanatory weaknesses are not, of course, personal failings. In terms of intellectual sophistication and empirical range, Pierre Bourdieu's work is virtually peerless. The problem, paradoxical as this may sound, is that Bourdieu has no theory of class structure in the sense of a structured relationship between direct producers and surplus appropriators whose interaction could drive historical development. Bourdieu's fields do not themselves contain any dynamic of development; their occupants, mired as they are in misrecognition, can never constitute collective actors.

### WHY BOURDIEU?

It is important to face the facts. Despite these serious problems, Bourdieu is the sociological theorist of the hour. Indeed, when people mention “theory” in the context of a discussion about sociology, they usually mean Bourdieu. In the period between 1980 and 1984, only 2 percent of all articles in the top four sociology journals cited Bourdieu, but by the first half-decade of the twenty-first century, this had increased to 12 percent.<sup>68</sup> If these articles were restricted exclusively to ambitious theoretical treatises, one can imagine that the number would expand considerably. Wacquant's description of Bourdieu as “the most celebrated sociologist of the moment” still holds true more than a decade after Bourdieu's death.<sup>69</sup> As a British scholar recently put it, “There is no doubt about it: Pierre Bourdieu

68 Sallaz and Zavisca, “Bourdieu in American Sociology,” 25–26.

69 Loïc Wacquant, “Further Notes on Bourdieu's ‘Marxism,’” *International Journal of Contemporary Sociology* 38, no. 1 (2001): 103–109, esp. 104.

is the single most influential sociologist of the later twentieth century.”<sup>70</sup> This imposes a serious puzzle. Since Bourdieu’s sociology does not offer a macrosociology, as it purports to, the attraction of his work must lie in a different direction. Thus a different approach to grasping its popularity is necessary. The remarks that follow are necessarily somewhat speculative and require real research to be substantiated. They are offered here in the spirit of discussion.

As I argued in the introduction to this article, there are three reasons for Bourdieu’s popularity among elite academics in the advanced capitalist countries, especially in the United States. First, his sociology resonates with the lived experience of academics; second, it offers an ersatz political identity to left-oriented academics; third, it offers a powerful defense of academic privilege and autonomy for professionally minded scholars. Bourdieusian sociology is thus best understood not as social theory at all, but as an ideological formation resting on a common experience and providing a political project that can integrate the academic “Left” and “Right.”

#### RESONANCE WITH LIVED EXPERIENCE

Many social theories gain their plausibility because they project onto a macro scale the microsocial worlds of their producers and consumers. This is particularly so with the Bourdieu’s notions of “field” and “symbolic power.” It would be entirely incorrect to conclude that because these concepts are a restrictive metaphor they are therefore universally inapplicable; this would reverse Bourdieu’s own dogmatism. On the contrary, the idea of field is highly applicable to academic life. Academics are in the business of stance-taking and distinction. Their cultural products do gain meaning in polemical opposition to others. It is not surprising, therefore, that some of Bourdieu’s most successful analyses focus on how political stances among intellectuals are often thinly veiled translations of their position in the field of cultural production.<sup>71</sup>

Thus, one of the main things Bourdieu’s work offers to elite academics is a generalization of their lived experience. From the perspective of Bourdieu’s

70 Will Atkinson, *Beyond Bourdieu: From Genetic Structuralism to Relational Phenomenology* (Cambridge: Polity, 2016), 1.

71 Bourdieu, *Homo Academicus*, xvii.

sociology, their social world can appear as a microcosm of society as a whole. Indeed, the notion that social life is constituted as a “field,” far from requiring a critical break with lived experience, is basically the common sense of how the world works for the professoriate.<sup>72</sup> It is therefore hard to imagine a sociological theory whose social ontology is more perfectly aligned with the lifeworld of the chattering classes.

#### ERSATZ POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT

Bourdieu’s sociology, however, offers something more than a generalization of the “professorial” experience. It also offers an identity, one with certain parallels to what Lenin called the “professional revolutionary.” Bourdieusian sociologists are a vanguard. They possess insights into the workings of the social world that derive from their social theory but are denied to the laity mired in the swamp of common sense and everyday understandings.

This entire conception is based on the notion of a radical cleft between social theory and lay knowledge, itself a consequence of universal misrecognition. Actors, insofar as they are stuck in the logic of practice, engaged in the social game, cannot grasp the real structure of the fields in which they act. They operate according to a preconscious, tacit conception of the world, a “feel for the game.” Reflection on the social world, the formation of the social as an object of knowledge, cannot occur within the game. Bourdieu insists repeatedly that the attribution of a reflective capacity to agents in a field of practice is an intellectualist illusion:

Knowledge does not depend solely as an elementary relativism teaches, on the particular “situated and given” point of view that an observer takes on the object: there is a much more fundamental alteration, and a much more pernicious one, since, being constitutive of the operation of knowledge, it is likely to pass without being perceived, that practice undergoes by the sole fact of taking “a point of view” on it and thus

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<sup>72</sup> David Swartz puts the point well in *Culture and Power*: “The focus on individual competition as the predominant form of conflict in modern stratified societies certainly taps an important dimension of differentiation in the modern period. However, this focus may also disproportionately reflect Bourdieu’s own professional milieu and his choice of areas of investigation. Education and high-brow culture are supreme instances of individual competitiveness and distinction. These preferred substantive areas of investigation may have excessively shaped his view of class conflict” (188).

constituting it as an object (of observation and analysis).<sup>73</sup>

For Bourdieu, then, reflective thought, the formation of practice as an object of analysis, requires a break with practice. Conversely, practice as lived experience requires a break with reflection. Agents can act only in so far as they *do not* reflect on their actions; reflection is, consequently, possible only from a position outside the field of action.

Sociological insight requires a break with practice, achieved through a special form of training through which budding sociologists create a new habitus or set of scientific dispositions to replace their preexisting lay ones. There is therefore a nexus between theory and practice in Bourdieu's sociology — but, unlike revolutionary Marxism, for example, this nexus has its effects primarily *within the world of sociology*.

Rogers Brubaker, in an essay that goes a long way to clarifying Bourdieu's appeal along this dimension, has grasped this point particularly clearly. He calls for a break with “conceptualist, theoreticist, logocentric reading[s]” of Bourdieu; in other words, with readings that would examine the logical coherence and empirical plausibility of Bourdieu's works. Instead, the aspiring sociologist “should aim to master practically, to incorporate into his or her habitus, the thinking tools that Bourdieu makes available.”<sup>74</sup> Unfortunately, those who lack “access to Bourdieu's *atelier* [workshop] or seminar room” tend to confront his work theoretically rather than practically.<sup>75</sup> Zavisca and Sallaz express a similar idea in less elevated language when they ask “how Bourdieu's ideas have been put to use in research published in major American sociology journals.”<sup>76</sup> Bourdieu's sociology, in short, promises a kind of self-transformation. Correctly approached, it is *a way of becoming a sociologist* rather than an explanatory framework for understanding the social world.

Bourdieu's sociology, from this perspective, can be thought of as a kind of secularized radical Protestantism, promising a form of intellectual rebirth through practices of discipline designed to create a new sociological habitus. Like the Calvinist ethic Weber described, Bourdieu's sociology requires a constant examination of the self, a process glossed under the term

73 Bourdieu, *Le sens pratique*, 46.

74 Rogers Brubaker, “Social Theory as Habitus,” in *Bourdieu: Critical Perspectives*, edited by Craig Calhoun, Edward LiPuma and Moishe Postone (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 217, 219.

75 *Ibid.*, 216.

76 Sallaz and Zavisca, “Bourdieu in American Sociology,” 22.

“reflexivity.”<sup>77</sup> Culturally, this sociology belongs to a range of other practices highly characteristic of the contemporary intelligentsia: yoga, fad diets, exercise monitors, and so on.<sup>78</sup>

Why would academics look for this? There is no reason to think that Bourdieusian sociologists are any more careerist than others; indeed, if anything, the opposite is probably true. The sorts of intellectuals who are drawn to Bourdieu tend to want to use their knowledge to better the world. But, particularly in the United States, they lack any plausible political vehicle for linking their studies to social change. There is no organizational connection between social theory and political practice: excluding, of course, the vast sea of intellectually empty and crypto-technocratic “policy-relevant” social science churned out by the truckload in American academia. One hypothesis to explain the attraction of Bourdieu’s work is that it turns the potentially radical energy of social critique inward, thereby creating a form of political engagement that promises the attainable goal of accumulating “symbolic power” in lieu of confronting real exploitation and domination. The appeal is best indicated, again, by Brubaker’s gloss: the point of Bourdieu’s texts “is not simply to interpret the world; it is to change the world, by changing the way in which we — in the first instance, *other social scientists* — see it.”<sup>79</sup> This pale recapitulation of Marx’s (uncited, naturally) eleventh thesis on Feuerbach is an effective summation of Bourdieu’s appeal. In him we have a thinker who mobilizes vast intellectual resources in the pursuit of a militant project to transform sociological consciousness in place of transforming society.

#### THE DEFENSE OF ACADEMIC PRIVILEGE

The inner-directed radicalism of Bourdieu’s sociology is paradoxically connected to another distinctive feature of it: its obsession with the defense of differentiation or “autonomy.” Bourdieu’s ultimate political vision, despite the radical-chic vestments in which it appears, is classic pluralism, familiar to readers of Dahl, de Tocqueville, Mosca, or Weber. This view grounds a defense of intellectual autonomy in a quite conservative sense as the institutional basis

77 For a canonical discussion of this dimension of Bourdieu’s work see Loïc Wacquant, “Toward a Social Praxeology: The Structure and Logic of Bourdieu’s Sociology,” in Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1992), 36–46.

78 For a good discussion of this, see Mark Greif, *Against Everything* (New York: Pantheon, 2016).

79 Brubaker, “Social Theory as Habitus,” 217.

for forcing the dominant class to universalize its particular interests.

This claim might seem tendentious. Therefore, it is important to acknowledge that much of what Bourdieu had to say politically was quite radical, especially at the beginning of his intellectual career in Algeria and toward the end of it, as he combated French neoliberalism during the nineties. Indeed, some of his political stances, particularly in the realm of geopolitics, are strikingly acute, incomparably superior to the bovine platitudes that pass for “political analysis” in much of US sociology.<sup>80</sup> One litmus test of his political independence is his rightful and forceful condemnation of the NATO bombing of Serbia, at a time when many “progressives” in North America and Europe were mumbling mealy-mouthed apologetics.

But the striking thing about Bourdieu's political writings, however, is how limited they are. In the absence of any theory of capitalism, his political positions amount basically to a defense of existing arrangements against the encroachment of market logic. His fundamental political value is autonomy, particularly the autonomy of sociology, rather than freedom or equality. The intellectual foundations of this politics are rather conservative. Nowhere is this stated more clearly than at the end of *La noblesse état*:

It is clear that whatever their grounds or motives, these struggles among the dominants necessarily add to the field of power a bit of that universal — reason, disinterestedness, civic-mindedness, etc. — that, originating as it does in previous struggles, is always a symbolically effective weapon in the struggles of the moment. And, while taking care not to pronounce judgments on the comparative merits of one or another regime that are often identified with “political philosophy,” we may advance the notion that progress in the differentiation of forms of power is constituted by so many protective acts against tyranny, understood after the manner of Pascal, as the infringement of one order upon the rights of another, or more precisely, as the intrusion of the forms of power associated with one field in the functioning of another.<sup>81</sup>

Bourdieu here appears to embrace a vision of society run by a plural, interlocking set of elites engaged in struggle with one another and as a result

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<sup>80</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Political Interventions: Social Science and Political Action* (New York: Verso, 2008), 355–57.

<sup>81</sup> Bourdieu, *State Nobility*, 389.

constantly forced to articulate their particular interests in general terms.<sup>82</sup> This argument strongly recalls the notion of a mixed constitution: a political vision running from Aristotle to Weber and beyond. At the end of the day, then, Bourdieu's sociology, in some contrast to his explicit political writing, leads to the endorsement of hoary elitist liberalism, providing an honorable perch for the sociologist as the modest sage of the good society. What it does not contain, of course, is a critique, or even analysis, of capitalism as a system of class relations.

### CONCLUSION

The appeal of Bourdieu's sociology, in short, is due neither to its explanatory power nor to its ability to generate new problems and questions. There are very few explanations in his corpus, and the main ones that do exist are implausible. To account for Bourdieu's ascendancy, one must look therefore to the "logic of practice" rather than the "logic of theory." Bourdieu's sociology simultaneously resonates with the lived experience of elite academics, offers a form of ersatz radicalism focused on self-transformation, and provides the sociologist with a sense of having an elevated social role. This is not to imply that the Bourdieusian mentality is wholly negative. Perhaps the best analogy is to the role of Protestantism prior to the French Revolution. Before an actual political movement aimed at establishing modern citizenship emerged, the struggle for it took the form of an attempt to remake the self through practices of discipline. Bourdieu's sociology may be similar in this sense. Perhaps it is the placeholder for whatever truly radical critical theory will come after. In any case a radical, self-conscious movement to subject the entire of society to truly human control will signal not the fulfillment but the end of Bourdieusian sociology. ✧

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82 Ibid.