

Contribution of the cultural class analysts sociology essay

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3. Critically assess the contribution of the 'cultural class analysts' to class research

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Firmly inscribed in the grand narrative of social science, the arc of class analysis not only reflects one of the traditional theoretical disputes that still pervade contemporary sociological thought - that of Marx and Weber - but also the challenges raised by late modernity as epitomised by theories of individualisation, reflexivity and risk. Starting with an analysis of the conceptual and theoretical architecture of Pierre Bourdieu, vis-à-vis the traditional Marxist and Weberian approaches to class research, this essay will attempt to demonstrate how the distinctive conceptual framework of the French sociologist managed to supersede fundamental epistemic oppositions that had plagued class analysis and, in doing so, ultimately recast the debate on class. Then, it will briefly assess some contributions of a nouvelle vague of cultural class analysts in the UK who have engaged with Bourdieu in an attempt to breathe new life into class analysis and refute the 'death of class' thesis. Finally, and taking a sympathetic stance towards the legacy of Pierre Bourdieu, it will sustain that while the future avenues of class analysis might greatly benefit from a continuing reflexive engagement with Bourdieu's theoretical and conceptual framework, researchers must also ensure that its key ontological properties are preserved.

Pierre Bourdieu, Agent Provocateur[1]

Hailed as one of the foremost thinkers of the twentieth century, Pierre Bourdieu still rouses sociological imagination as his vast legacy, provocative and controversial in its character, continues to spark equally fierce passions

and hostilities. But before examining some of the sensitive areas of contention closely entwined with Bourdieu's reframing of class, it seems wise to recall one of the fundamental heuristic principles that inform his critical sociology: the drive to 'disclose the means by which systems of domination impose themselves without conscious recognition of society's members' (Swartz, 1997: 56). Such aim not only prompted Bourdieu to engage in an eclectic dialogue with sociological canon and phenomenology as a means to transcend archetypal epistemic oppositions, such as objectivism/subjectivism or structure/agency (Fowler, 1997; Swartz, 1997; Grenfell, 2008), but also to frequently 'twist the stick in the other direction' (Wacquant, 1993: 35) - a tendency that is particularly salient in the elaboration of his elliptical prose, therefore making it prone to misinterpretations by sympathisers and detractors alike. Thus, in order to appropriately engage with Bourdieu's sociology, one must grasp his work as a whole rather than mere fragments of it (Fowler, 1997; Grenfell, 2008).

A New Social Cartography

To start us off with the analysis of the role of class in Bourdieu's 'grand scheme of things', one must keep in mind that in order to think of class with Bourdieu, one must also embrace an epistemological stance which rejects substantialism and embraces relational thought: the 'real' of the social world is not to be identified with substance but with relations (Swartz, 1997; Grenfell, 2008). This relationism, however, is not to be confused with that of Marx or Weber in which class is determined by material relationships of production or in the market and thus based on single-dimensional scales and cumulative indices (Weininger, 2005; Crompton, 2008). On the contrary,

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Bourdieu's relational method entails the use of a sophisticated cartography which synthesises a series of breaks with objectivism, economics and Marxist theory (Bourdieu, 1992: 229). All societies appear as social spaces, that is, as structures of difference that can only be understood by constructing the generative principle which objectively grounds those differences, this principle is none other than the structure of the distribution of the forms of power or the kinds of capital which are effective in the social universe under consideration - and which vary according to the specific place and moment at hand. (Bourdieu, 1998: 32) Social space thus emerges simultaneously as a 'field of forces whose necessity is imposed on agents who are engaged in it' and as a 'field of struggles within which agents confront each other' (Ibid: 33). This agonistic conceptualisation of the social space, which draws Bourdieu closer to Max Weber, expresses a clear break with the objectivist tendency to overlook the symbolic struggles that take place in different fields. For Bourdieu, symbolic struggle is the ubiquitous engine for social rupture and continuity (Wacquant, 2007) and class, as a subjective symbolic construct, becomes simultaneously "the object and the subject of cognitive struggles" (Bourdieu, 1987: 9). This emphasis on symbolic struggle is a key feature on Bourdieu's critique of the arbitrariness of the systems of domination and their exertion of symbolic violence, a theme which will be revisited in the course of this essay. The structural architecture of the social space also displays a clear opposition to the economic bias that underpins Marxist class theory which reduces the complexities of the social world and its interactions to the economic field alone, whilst ignoring all other fields (Bourdieu, 1992: 244). Bourdieu's escape-route from this reductionism has

sometimes been interpreted as a paradoxical relapse into the trap that it tries to circumvent - sporadically even by his sympathisers (Skeggs, 2004; Sayer, 2005) - considering the reliance on traditional 'economic jargon'. However, and keeping in mind Bourdieu's distinctive style, the use of concepts such as 'capital' and 'interest' must be understood metaphorically and in the context of an exercise of theoretical craftsmanship that effectively turns economic reductionism on its head: Economic theory has allowed to be foisted upon it a definition of the economy of practices which is the historical invention of capitalism; and by reducing the universe of exchanges to mercantile exchange, which is objectively and subjectively oriented towards the maximisation of profit, i. e., (economically) self-interested, it has implicitly defined the other forms of exchange as non-economic, and therefore disinterested. (Bourdieu, 2004: 15-16) Bourdieu re-introduces the concept of capital in social interaction by taking a very broad definition of capital as 'accumulated labour' and then differentiating it into three fundamental forms[2], expanding it well beyond the constraints of the economic field. Thus, there is economic capital, in the form of wealth and property; cultural capital which may exist in three different states: in the embodied state - as the long-lasting dispositions of the mind and the body, in the objectified state - in the form of cultural goods, and in the institutionalised state - a form of objectification as seen in the case of educational qualifications; and social capital as the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition (Bourdieu, 2004: 15-21) A fourth form, symbolic capital is later

introduced as 'capital with a cognitive base, which rests on cognition and recognition' (Bourdieu, 1998: 85). By rehabilitating the conceptual use of capital, Bourdieu not only links it with other forms of power, but also expands the underlying principle of interest to other fields, social interactions and, in particular, to social practice. Furthermore, the ontology of the social space also repudiates a perfect correspondence between the 'class on paper' and the 'real class'. To carve class out of the social space is to fuse theory and research. Class is never studied in and for itself; rather, it is tested through research in which the theoretical and the empirical are inseparable and which mobilises numerous methods of observation and measurement - quantitative and qualitative, statistical and ethnographic, macro-sociological and micro-sociological. (Bourdieu, 1998: 2).

The theoretical class, then, only exists virtually, in abstract theory, as a product of an explanatory classification, and not as ready-made mobilised entity in the real world waiting to be discovered by the social scientist. As Bourdieu further argues, 'real' class, if such a thing exists, 'is a result of the struggle of classifications, a struggle to impose a vision of the world, or, better, a way to construct the world, in perception and in reality' (Ibid: 11).

By drawing this sharp distinction, Bourdieu marks a further break with the Marxist tradition and its teleological (mis)conception of class that confuses 'the things of logic with the logic of things'. This intellectualist fallacy relates to an ontological conversion of a 'class in itself', as defined by objective conditions, to a 'class for itself', based on subjective factors, prompted by an 'awakening of consciousness' framed by either voluntarist or deterministic flawed logic (Bourdieu, 1992: 233). The position of each agent

in social space is then determined through a three-dimensional system of objective relations structured along three orthogonal axes. The most important of those, x , represents the composition of capital that each agent holds (predominantly economic or cultural), y accounts for the overall volume of capital possessed (the sum of economic, cultural, social and symbolic capital) and z illustrates the trajectory of the individual across time, given the variations in the composition and volume of capital (Weininger, 2005). The re-conceptualisation and operationalization of capital, particularly in its cultural form, have been challenged on the grounds that they downplay the importance of economic inequalities in processes of social stratification (Crompton, 2008). This criticism, however, seems to disregard that economical capital does indeed play a crucial role in the structuring of social space (Atkinson, 2010: 48) and that Bourdieu actually retains Marx's insistence on grounding class in material relations of force (Wacquant, 2007). The multi-dimensional and relational properties of the social space thus favour the systematisation of a class structure that is not static or immutable – as opposed to the conventional alternatives – and whose topology permits a dynamic analysis of the conservation and transformation of the structure of the active properties' distribution (Bourdieu, 1998). Moreover, by rejecting an essentialist conceptualisation of class, Bourdieu successfully avoids the pitfalls of the epistemic ambition that has prompted Marxists and Weberians alike – Erik Olin Wright and Goldthorpe being the most notorious examples (Crompton, 2008) – to refine and re-define their classificatory schemata in hopes of uncovering the 'real' boundaries of class. So far, these efforts have yet to offer a satisfactory answer to the particularly puzzling array of

questions raised by the 'middle-classes' as their ambiguous theoretical status, social and structural positions are at odds with a misconception of their ontological status as ready-made entities (Wacquant, 1991) easily fitted into classificatory containers. Therefore, at the risk of employing an overly prophetic tone, one might anticipate that classes as envisioned by conservative Marxist and Weberian theories are very likely to remain ill-defined, as their limits cannot be abstractly fixed.

Habitus, a Deus Ex-Machina?

Social space, Bourdieu argues, 'is to the practical space of everyday life what the geometrical space is to the traveling space of ordinary experience' (Bourdieu, 1984: 165), it reveals the points of view from which agents apprehend the world, the distances and proximities that mediate their exteriority vis-à-vis one another. While proximity in social space does not automatically engender unity (Bourdieu, 1998: 11), it nevertheless presupposes that agents occupying adjacent positions share similar conditions of existence (i. e. volume and composition of capital and a relative distance from material necessity). These analytical classes 'lead to the common root of the classifiable practices which agents produce and of the classificatory judgements they make of other agents' practices and their own (Bourdieu, 1984: 165). Taste (i. e., manifested preference) then, is the practical realisation of such classificatory schemata: 'it unites all those who share similar conditions of existence while differentiating them from all others' (Ibid: 49). Class differences, therefore, are not only the expression of objective material inequalities, but also the mirror of symbolic distinctions experienced through individual subjectivities. In order to account for the

complicity between economic/social condition and its corresponding position in the universe of life-styles, Bourdieu introduces a mediating principle: the habitus. The habitus is Bourdieu's answer to the convoluted relationship between social structure and human agency, an attempt to surpass this archetypal antinomy by capturing the micro and macro, voluntarist and determinist dimensions of human activity in one single conceptual movement (Swartz, 1997: 101). Similarly, the habitus emerges as a reaction to both the structuralism of Lévi-Strauss, and its view of action as a mere reflection of structure, and the voluntarism in Sartre's existentialism, with its stress on 'authentic action' (Fowler, 1997; Swartz, 1997): The habitus is, at once, a 'structuring and structured structure' (Bourdieu, 1984: 166). It captures the way in which society becomes inscribed in the individual in the form of lasting dispositions of the body and the mind, or trained capacities to think or act in determinate ways while, simultaneously, guiding him in his creative responses to the stimuli of the milieu (Wacquant, 2005: 316). It generates perceptions, appreciations and practices without either explicit reason or signifying intent, to be none the less 'sensible' and 'reasonable' (Bourdieu, 1990: 53). This conceptualisation of habitus, with its stress on the unconscious embodiment of social structures and pre-reflexive dispositions, is once more a testimony to Bourdieu's strong stance against economic reductionism and, in particular, against the way it pushed its rigorous rational choice agenda into substantive areas of sociology. Rational choice theory, Bourdieu argues, is the product of an 'intellectualist fallacy' in which the attributes of conscious, rational calculation to act are but a projection of the cognitive posture of the theorist (1990: 60). Bourdieu's interest-oriented

action, i. e. action leaning towards the maximisation of profit, by contrast, does not assume à priori conscious, rational calculation. Agents do pursue strategies, but these tend to be tacit, practical, and dispositional, rather than carefully concocted conscious plans (Swartz, 1997: 70). There is, however, some ambiguity at this point, as Bourdieu makes no consistent distinction between conscious and unconscious forms of interest calculation, a gap is frequently interpreted as a fall back to objectivism and determinism (Crompton, 2008). The harshest criticisms thus tend to mistake habitus for fatum (Goldthorpe, 2007) or question if the concept does accommodate any form of 'dissent, criticism and opposition' (Eagleton, in Holton, 1997: 40) as it over-characterises agents as 'unconscious bearers of interest calculation' deprived of agency or free will (Honneth, in Ibid: 42). Such criticisms however reveal a crude understanding of the concept as an immutable and encapsulated system; moreover, they seem to suggest that the habitus alone determines a strict course of action - both flawed assumptions. Far from being a finalised product, the habitus is 'an open system of dispositions that is constantly subjected to experiences and therefore constantly affected by them in a way that either reinforces or modifies its structures; it is durable but not eternal' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 133). Furthermore, actors 'are not simple followers or norm obeyers but strategic improvisers who respond dispositionally to the opportunities and constraints offered by various situations' (Swartz, 1997: 100). Additionally, the conceptualisation of habitus is underpinned by relational thought: action is the product of the intersection of class dispositions with the dynamics and structures of particular competitive arenas or fields or, in other words, of the

dialectical relationship between habitus and field (Bouvaresse, 1999).

Wacquant's 'stanislavskian' incursion in pugilism is perhaps the most notorious assessment of the applicability of the habitus both empirically and methodologically. If, on the one hand, Wacquant attempts to uncover the processes of production of bodily dispositions and cognitive structures which characterise the competences of the boxer, on the other, the apprentice boxer puts the theory to the test by replicating himself the encounter of the pugilist habitus with the very field that substantiates its production. The product of this encounter relates to an embodied practical reason which emerges from the ontological complicity between the habitus and the field and which escapes from the grasp of rational individual choice (Wacquant, 2004: 98).

Symbolic Power, Legitimation and Misrecognition

Despite avoiding a mechanistic logic, the interplay between habitus and field does indeed favour Durkheimian notions of 'social cohesion' and 'equilibrium'. There is a clear emphasis on continuity rather than disruption, for it is precisely the symbiosis of habitus and field that enables the exertion of a more obscure form of power and the (mis)recognition it entails.

Symbolic power, both formidable and elusive, thus emerges as subtle and insidious, perpetrating its own form of violence through a symbolic logic of inclusion and inclusion which pervades even the most mundane aspects of everyday life, such as the manifestation of taste. Symbolic power inhabits the dispositions of the habitus, shaping perception and action and the sense of one's place in the social structure, thus legitimating social hierarchy and the maintenance of such arbitrary order. In other words, symbolic power

constructs reality by creating and inculcating systems of classification/categorisation which are aligned with the constellation of interests of the dominant class - the victor in the struggle for the imposition of a particular vision of the world that is universally known and recognised as legitimate. It is the inculcation of habitus, and its embodied principles of vision and division of the world, which, in agreement with the objective structures of the world, creates a sort of infra-conscious fit with the structures within which agents evolve, 'so that domination operates through belief, through a doxic[4]relation to structures' (Wacquant, 1993: 34). Again, common criticisms point towards a deterministic reading of the social world and an incompatibility between habitus and social change (Holton, 1997; Swartz, 1997; Grenfell, 2008) which have inspired countless sympathetic attempts (some more accomplished than others) to reconcile habitus, agency, reflexivity and change (Noble and Watkins, 2003; Myles, 2004; Hilgers, 2009). However, most of them seem to disregard that the emphasis Bourdieu bestows upon the reproduction of the social structure is not without intent. While the habitus is by no means a device that sets and secures in place a *docta ignorantia* from which the agent cannot escape, Bourdieu aims to demystify the assumptions that 'the dominated are always on the alert, always ready to mobilise, to rise up, to overturn the oppression they suffer' (Wacquant, 1993: 95) or that resistance emerges spontaneously from suffering. On the contrary, the dominated are pre-disposed to perceive their condition as natural and therefore tend to accept it rather than resist it. Nevertheless, Bourdieu does not suggest that this seeming inertia cannot be interrupted. Social change, in its more or less abrupt forms, can occur under

specific circumstances, in the event of a disjunction between habitus and field: as the embodied cognitive structures and dispositions no longer fit the characteristics of the relative field, the agent might be forced to step out of his habitus and eventually reconsider and challenge the prevailing doxa. The persistence of social inequality in the absence of resistance occupies a central role in Bourdieu's critical sociology. The answer to riddle lies in the intricate relationship between culture and practice which 'obscures class power and provides the tools for social distinctions' which reproduce unequal social relations (Swartz, 1997: 285).

The Nouvelle Vague

Eleven years after his death, and following the translation and internationalisation of his oeuvre, Pierre Bourdieu has extended his influence on contemporary sociological scholarship on a world wide scale. In the UK, a growing number of class researchers have turned to Bourdieu for theoretical inspiration as a means to counter the increasingly technical and arcane specialism that had come to define class analysis (Savage, 2000: 148) while advocating for a more nuanced approach to the concept of class (Reay, 1998; Devine and Savage, 2000; Savage, 2000, 2003). This renewed interest in the complexities and idiosyncrasies of class, particularly those of class identity and imagery, also emerge as an attempt to dispute the late / post-modern obituaries that deem class as 'dead and buried' as a result of the advent of individualisation, reflexivity and cosmopolitanism (Crompton, 2008; Atkinson, 2010). The contributions of this nouvelle vague of 'cultural class analysts'[5] towards the revitalisation of class analysis have been diversified, not only in terms of their focus/object of research, but also in the

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ways in which they engage with Bourdieu's theoretical framework. There has been a much welcomed return to ethnographic accounts of contemporary 'working-class habitus', such as the visceral, though slightly one-dimensional, portrait of a decaying Rotherham (Charlesworth, 2000), and of the nuances of class identifications, including the ambivalences and complexities of popular identities (Reay, 1998; Savage, Bagnall and Longhurst, 2001). Regarding the latter, the discursive silences, lacunae and ambiguities towards class seem to suggest, as Savage argues, that class identities are not disappearing altogether but rather becoming more implicit (2000: 102). Similarly, class seems to have retained its importance in the organization of cultural taste and practice in the UK even though their boundaries seem to be in the process of being redrawn through the increasing interplay between economic and cultural capital (Le Roux et al., 2008; Bennett et al., 2009). Issues such as respectability and self-worth have also resurfaced (Skeggs, 2004; Sayer, 2005) and drawn attention towards the pathologies associated with the working class and sentiments of shame or inferiority. Though very different in their character, there is one underlying theme in all the works aforementioned: anxiety. While drawing heavily on Bourdieu, cultural analysts often seem so keen on innovating the French sociologist's conceptual framework that they end up appropriating and misusing concepts, frequently neglecting the ontological prescriptions of said framework. The result is a proliferation of capitals and habitus with very little theoretical consistency: 'institutional habitus' (Reay, 2004) is one among other creations which seem to conflate both the objective and subjective elements in Bourdieu's theory of practice. The concept of habitus itself is

sometimes so harshly criticised or, more specifically, misinterpreted (since its relational dimension tends to be overlooked) that its inclusion in the subsequent theoretical elaborations could be easily mistaken for mere courtesy (Bennett et al., 2009). Similarly, Bourdieu's re-conceptualisation of capital is referred to as overly economicist (Skeggs, 2004), an argument earlier debunked in this essay, only to give way to the use of far more troubling terminology: 'practice never ceases to conform to economic calculation' (Skeggs, 2004: 85). This does not mean that Bourdieu's conceptual and theoretical framework does not exhibit gaps or limitations that could/should be explored. In fact, there have been fertile discussions concerning, among others, the place of disinterested action, i. e. acts of altruism, in Bourdieu's theory of practice or the benefits of a phenomenological reading of the habitus (Frère, 2011). Still, when assessing the contributions of the aforementioned cultural class analysts, one cannot help but notice the lack of theoretical cohesion which, sporadically, lends such works an aura of pastiche.

What Makes a Social Class?

The work of Pierre Bourdieu offers foremost a theory of action, in rupture with conventional alternatives, which links action to culture and power under the auspices of class analysis; by pioneering a new social cartography, it supersedes the tribulations of uncovering the real boundaries of class and last, but not least, it presents a theory of symbolic domination which recognises the specificity of symbolic logic while grounding it in the objective structures of the distribution of different species of capital. Ultimately, all these contributions lead to a much needed revitalisation of the debate

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surrounding class beyond the entrenched dichotomies of structure/agency, objectivism/subjectivism. Furthermore, Bourdieu's legacy also provides a rich conceptual toolkit which, if used according to its ontological prescriptions and relational mode of thought, will further a fluid and multi-dimensional analysis of the ever changing landscape of class, and provide further insights on the persistence of inequalities and the challenges they raise to those who endure the negative effects of merciless processes of stratification. Atkinson, W. (2010) *Class, Individualization and Late Modernity*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. Bennett, T., Savage, M., Silva, E., Warde, A., Gayo-Cal, M. and Wright, D. (2009) *Culture, Class, Distinction*, Abingdon: Routledge. Bourdieu, P. (1984) *Distinction, A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, London: Routledge. Bourdieu, P. (1987) 'What Makes a Social Class? On the Theoretical and Practical Existence of Groups', *Berkeley Journal of Sociology*, pp. 1-17. Bourdieu, P. (1990) *In Other Words, Essays Towards a Reflexive Sociology*, Cambridge: Polity Press. Bourdieu, P. (1992) *Language and Symbolic Power*, Cambridge: Polity Press. Bourdieu, P. (1998) *Practical Reason, On the Theory of Action*, Cambridge: Polity Press. Bourdieu, P. (2000) *Pascalian Meditations*, Stanford: Stanford University Press. Bourdieu, P. (2004) 'The Forms of Capital', in Ball, S. (ed.) *The RoutledgeFalmer Reader in Sociology of Education*, London. Bourdieu, P. and Wacquant, L. (1992) *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*, Chicago: Chicago University Press. Bouvaresse, J. (1999) 'Rules, Dispositions and the Habitus', in Shusterman, R. (ed.) *Bourdieu, a Critical Reader*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers. Charlesworth, S. (2000) *A Phenomenology of Working Class Experience*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Crompton, R. (2008) *Class and Stratification*, 3rd

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