
The Forum

How Has Bourdieu Been Good to Think With? The Case of the United States

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The essay discusses the impact of Bourdieu on modern U.S. sociology. Specifically, I offer five observations about the reception and adoption of Bourdieu by U.S. sociologists from the perspective of someone who was involved in the process I describe as an active but not fully invested participant.

KEY WORDS: boundaries; Bourdieu; class; cognition; culture; theory.

INTRODUCTION

The place of Bourdieu in the small pantheon of individuals who have determined the shape of the social sciences at the beginning of the twenty-first century is beyond question. His work has transformed the terms of the discourse and what frontier research means in U.S. sociology today. This is no small feat given that this discipline is a huge machine indeed, as our some 14,000 sociologists are dispersed over more than 800 programs offering sociology degrees² and as our departments train academics who take teaching positions not only in the United States, but also in the most central and the most remote corners of the planet. Thus, we should not be surprised that we are still debating (as Claude Levi-Strauss [1963] would put it), for what purpose has Bourdieu been “good to think with” (1963:89). This cross-Atlantic conference organized to mark the 35th anniversary of the publication of Bourdieu’s landmark contribution, *Distinction* (Bourdieu, 1986), is the perfect occasion to attempt to bring elements of response to this question.³

The question itself presumes a pragmatic approach to Bourdieu’s work, one that considers it legitimate to pick and choose concepts, as opposed to

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² This figure corresponds to the membership of the American Sociological Association as of 2007. See also http://www.asanet.org/research/stats/characteristics_programs.cfm.

³ This conference was prepared at the invitation of Philippe Coulangeon as a keynote for the conference “Trente Ans après ‘La Distinction,’” which was held at Sciences Po November 4–6, 2010.

adopting the whole package. Among Bourdieuphiles, a number of researchers have spent their scholarly lives defending the necessary integrity of the whole package, while others have been more picky consumers. I propose that at the end of the day, we should eschew the narcissism of small differences to celebrate Bourdieu's effects on the social sciences. Sociology, anthropology, legal studies, science studies, and other fields are much better off today than they were 30 years ago, and this is in no small measure due to the unbelievably generative set of questions that Bourdieu and his main collaborators put on the various disciplinary agendas. To take one specific case, the face of U.S. sociology has been altered fundamentally in part because Bourdieu's work has spearheaded the remarkable growth of cultural sociology (which went from being a minor subfield when it was funded in 1986 to being one of the largest sections of the American Sociological Association in less than 20 years).⁴ This field remains one of the fastest growing areas of the American Sociological Association, attracting a larger number of graduate students than any other subfield (or section) (Lamont, 2004). Its influence is spreading across a range of specialties. Indeed, economic sociology, the sociology of organizations, the sociology of education, the sociology of social movements, comparative historical sociology, urban sociology, poverty, race, immigration, network analysis, and gender studies can be said to have taken or to be in the process of taking a "cultural turn," and of incorporating Bourdieu in their literatures at the same time.

Here, I do not aim to repeat what others before me have already done very well, to retrace the diffusion of the work of Pierre Bourdieu in the United States. Sallaz and Zavisca (2007) provide a detailed analysis of this process, focusing on the period between 1980 and 2004. They present graphs showing the growth in number of references to Bourdieu's work in four leading sociology journals during this period. They find that "capital" (especially cultural capital) dominates as a concept, and that 16–22% of the papers published in these four journals between 2000 and 2004 cited Bourdieu (but only 6% of the 40,40 articles considered over the 24-year period). Half the papers extend the work of Bourdieu by asking new theoretical and empirical questions—indeed, many questions that would have been foreign to Bourdieu's sociological habitus, questions that he did not anticipate and, in some cases, could not have imagined.

⁴ The growth of cultural sociology was also enabled by a convergence of factors that included the powerful multidisciplinary influence of the work of Clifford Geertz, the dynamic growth of cultural history (under the influence of Robert Darnton, Natalie Davis, and others), the legacy of Parsonians such as Robert Bellah and his students (with the considerable popularity of *Habits of the Heart* [1985]), the presence in top research departments of a dynamic and creative generation of scholars/teachers committed to spearheading the field by training a younger generations (to mention only some of those who are senior to me: Jeffrey Alexander, Judith Blau, Craig Calhoun, Paul DiMaggio, Gary Alan Fine, Wendy Griswold, Joseph Gusfield, Chandra Mujerki, Michael Schudson, Bill Sewell, Ann Swidler, and Robert Wuthnow), the slowing down of macro-structural sociology at the end of the 1970s, the relative decline and marginalization of symbolic interactionism in U.S. sociology, the spread of methodological pluralism in sociology, the growth of the discipline, and its diversification.

Given this careful analysis of Bourdieu's diffusion that is already at our disposal, I chose to take a more reflective, speculative, and, in some respects, more controversial tack. Drawing in part on Lamont (2009a; see also Silva and Warde, 2009), these comments take the form of five observations about the reception and adoption of Bourdieu by U.S. sociologists from the perspective of someone who was involved in the process I describe as an active but not fully invested participant. There were many moments of tension—des “moments chauds” (hot moments), as French sociologists like to say—where those involved cared deeply about how Bourdieu's work was being diffused. Of course, I cared too, but relatively early I made the decision to not focus on the task of “framing Bourdieu for Americans” and to move across topics. My 1992 book, *Money, Morals, and Manners*, was the very first qualitative study that took Bourdieu's work as a point of departure to analyze the impact of culture on class structuration in a comparative context. Like many scholars who knew Bourdieu's work well, given the extraordinary growth of the “Bourdieu industry” over the last 30 years, I could have spent a great deal of time contributing to publications that dealt with his work, or reviewing papers that applied his framework, but I chose otherwise. Nevertheless, Bourdieu, with whom I had studied in the late 1970s—just at the time when *Distinction* first came out—remained a fertile point of reference for my work.

As is well known, Bourdieu was intent on controlling the diffusion of his work to the United States, as is most evident in Bourdieu and Wacquant's (1992) *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*, which might have received as a subtitle “How Bourdieu Prefers to be Read.” I would suggest that from the start there was a major tension in the importation of Bourdieu to the United States, between what we could term the “orthodox” and the “heterodox” take on his work. From the onset, I located myself firmly in the heterodox camp, a position that I helped defined (Lamont, 2009a). I promoted an approach to Bourdieu's *oeuvre* that took it as a point of departure, and as a means for generating new questions, mainly through an empirical confrontation between it and other realities, such as U.S. class cultures. This was somewhat of a break with the previous U.S. literature, which, but for a few notable exceptions (e.g., DiMaggio, 1987), often celebrated, explained, or applied Bourdieu to the United States.

In proper Bourdieusian mode, instead of focusing on past orthodoxy and heterodoxy, we can look at what seems to me to be the contemporary *doxa*—what is taken for granted, included, and excluded in how Bourdieu is now put to work in the U.S. context. Below, I discuss what I see as some of the main aspects. I will focus on the following themes: (1) the changing relationship between French and U.S. sociology; (2) the uneven absorption of Bourdieu's critics on U.S. shores; (3) the centrality of quantification in the U.S. reception of Bourdieu; (4) the impact of Bourdieu on the cultural mutation of “theory”; and (5) a new focus on “boundary work.” There could be more—for instance, the influence of Bourdieu on the older and newest trends in the sociology of education (*viz.* the work of Elizabeth Armstrong,

Amy Binder, Ruben Gaztambide-Fernandez, Neil Gross, Annette Lareau, Jal Mehta, Mitchell Stevens, Natasha Warikoo, and others) or its influence on historical sociology (as presented in particular in Gorski, forthcoming)—but I will limit myself to these five themes. In some cases, I also consider enabling and constraining factors.

1. CHANGING RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN FRENCH AND U.S. SOCIOLOGY

U.S. sociologists have always had a troubled, and troublesome, relationship with French sociology. On the one hand, it is fair to say that many U.S. sociologists perceive their French counterparts as relatively low on the totem pole of good empirical sociological practice—and by empirical, I mean the ability to formulate new theoretical questions and to mobilize qualitative or quantitative data to answer them. This requires being able to position oneself in whole literatures, as opposed to speaking to a group of like-minded sociologists, a skill that is not systematically taught in graduate programs in France. On the other hand, a number of U.S. sociologists are eager consumers of European theories, including those of Gallic origin. Some want to read Bourdieu like they would read Anthony Giddens, Ulrich Beck, Michel Foucault, or even Jean Baudrillard (Cusset, 2003). In the early 1980s, when I came to Stanford from Paris, Bourdieu was still associated with the intellectual faddishness of these names and many U.S. sociologists did not understand why he was consequential and for what.

I wish to advance the idea that the taken-for-granted troubled and troublesome relationship between U.S. and French sociology was fundamentally challenged with the Bourdieusian conquest of the United States. I would venture that a majority of sociologists below 50 have read his work and been influenced by it in the formulation of their empirical work—notably through professors teaching in the leading departments, who train faculty for the system as a whole (I am thinking, of course, of Loic Wacquant, but also of Craig Calhoun, Rogers Brubaker, Paul DiMaggio, Mustafa Emirbayer, Marion Fourcade, Philip Gorski, Jerome Karabel, Annette Lareau, George Steinmetz, and Viviana Zelizer, among others). This below-50 crowd is generally encouraged to adopt an eclectic attitude toward methods—that is, they are practitioners of qualitative and quantitative research alike, and they have often been somewhat influenced by Bourdieu in how they go about formulating their guiding questions. This was reflected in submissions under consideration for a recent best book award given by the Culture Section of the ASA—I was told by one of the evaluators that the vast majority of books under evaluation took Bourdieu as a significant point of reference, and younger scholars are most numerous among those whose books are considered for this award. I take this to be evidence of the transformation of the context of reception. Whether

orthodoxy or heterodoxy triumphs matters less than the deep disciplinary transformation brought about by the diffusion of Bourdieu's work.

2. THE UNEVEN ABSORPTION OF BOURDIEU'S CRITICS ON U.S. SHORES

As the work of Bourdieu developed and gained its hegemony in the French intellectual scene, alternatives developed, some of them attacking explicitly what the critics perceived to be "the blind spots" of Bourdieusian sociology. I am referring primarily to Michel Callon and Bruno Latour's actor-network theory (ANT) and to the work of the Groupe de sociologie politique et morale (GSPM), animated by former Bourdieu students Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot. While Latour was concerned with the agency of nonhumans (among other topics), to simplify, Boltanski and Thévenot (1991) denounced Bourdieu's blindedness to the perspective of the actor (his critical sociology) and promoted a sociology analyzing the range of "postures" (or orientations) that actors take across situations (in good Goffmanian/ethnomethodological fashion). Working together with a dynamic team of collaborators, they explore a range of innovative topics absent from Bourdieu's work—commensuration, "épreuve de grandeur," and regimes of proximity, to mention only a few. These two lines of work have had an enormous influence on the current generation of French sociologists below 50, and some of them are influenced as well by Bourdieu and the Bourdieusians (members of the Centre de sociologie européenne contributed mightily to Bourdieu's work, for example, sociologist Monique de St-Martin, to mention only one particularly generative scholar). While Latourian sociology is at the center of the incredibly dynamic transnational field of science and technology studies (STS), it is penetrating unevenly into U.S. sociology, where in the most conventional quarters, the sociology of science has continued to be viewed as a somewhat peculiar and suspect endeavor, nor has the work of Boltanski and Thévenot, despite the existence of excellent introductions (e.g., Wagner, 1999). The translation of their book *De la Justification* was finally published in 2006 after delays. It is widely cited but, I believe, not well understood, except in some circles (e.g., the ones animated by David Stark at Columbia University and by Nina Eliasoph and Paul Lichterman at the University of Southern California). It has generated a remarkable wave of creative and exciting work in France that has yet to diffuse to the United States (e.g., Lemieux, 2000; Dodier, 2005; Roussel, 2002). The doxa of reception of Bourdieu's work in the United States has been such that this wider conversation simply has yet to fully take root, partly because of differences in theoretical background, and partly because the authors built on parts of U.S. sociology that are not exactly prospering right now—for example, ethnomethodology and the Chicago School, the latter being a more salient point of reference in French than in U.S. sociology nowadays. But it is still too early for a final verdict. What

really took off in U.S. sociology is survey research that expanded on Peterson and Simkus's (1992) omnivorousness hypothesis. Why was that? This is the third aspect of the contemporary doxa, to which I now turn.

3. THE CENTRALITY OF SURVEY RESEARCH IN THE U.S. RECEPTION OF BOURDIEU

In an early paper, Lamont and Lareau (1988) argued that whereas Bourdieu presumed that a legitimate culture existed, there is important cross-national variability in the permeability of class boundaries and the degree of consensus and stability of the legitimate culture. We advanced the idea that in the United States, as compared to France, we have a "loosely bounded culture" where cultural practices are not clearly hierarchized, where people consume high and low culture, where distinction does not operate in terms of who is in and out, and where many are tolerant of or indifferent toward those who are different from them. Some of these criticisms were fully developed in my book *Money, Morals, and Manners* and inspired the development of the "omnivorousness thesis" (as described in Peterson [2005]) and related important papers such as Bryson (1996).

Of all the critiques of Bourdieu that had been formulated, one that particularly took off was connected to the omnivorousness thesis, which Peterson, by then retired, spent a lot of time promoting in the United States and Europe. The availability of suitable survey data for a large number of countries made the diffusion of this line of research possible, as did the ideal of replicability in U.S. sociology, and the fact that one could teach graduate students how to study omnivorousness using survey data. This explains partly why based on their systematic content analysis of the literature, Sallaz and Zavisca (2007) could conclude that "cultural capital" dominates within the Bourdieu-inspired U.S. literature: because building on the omnivorousness hypothesis became a popular and standardized (and sometimes quite predictable) form of intellectual production.

The journal *Poetics* played an important role in this process by publishing a great many survey-based articles (often written by young Ph.D.s) that examined whether and how this thesis held and how it varied across a number of groups and national contexts. Under the leadership of Kees Van Rees and Paul DiMaggio, the journal was viewed in the Netherlands as the anti-Foucault/Baudrillard/Deleuze arm of literary studies, and defined itself as firmly empirical and in practice was probably more quantitative than qualitative. The role played by this journal in the international diffusion of Bourdieu's work cannot be underestimated, as it showcased a wide range of new scholars and helped the institutionalization of cultural sociology. Its resonance or fit with U.S. cultural sociology could not have been better, as the field was growing in part by proposing a research agenda defined in opposition to that of U.S. cultural studies. In line with the older production of

culture approach, which advocated treating culture like widgets, limiting the role of interpretation in the equation was viewed as essential to the legitimation of the field, especially in a context where young cultural sociologists aimed to be hired by top departments where less hermeneutic epistemological positions prevailed. But this is only half the story.

4. THE IMPACT OF BOURDIEU ON THE CULTURAL MUTATION OF “THEORY”

Indeed, the picture that emerges is more complicated and less straightforward than I have suggested up to now. For one, many sociologists interested in theory also became interested in Bourdieu and came to define themselves as cultural sociologists. Many research departments wanting to hire theorists did in fact hire cultural sociologists (as shown in Lamont [2004]), and many of them were breastfed Bourdieusian milk from a tender age. However, the Bourdieu they consumed was not channeled through the omnivorousness hypothesis, but through *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Bourdieu, 1977), and through a Bourdieu more heavily influenced by the Durkheim of the *Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, a Bourdieu concerned with agency, classification, representations, and the interaction between symbolic and other aspects of power. Although less consistently organized into a self-conscious and self-referential literature, those teaching and producing this kind of scholarship have remained a deep-seated and powerful presence in the field and can be regarded as a significant counterpart to the omnivorousness literature.

5. A NEW FOCUS ON BOUNDARY WORK

A final area of activity that grew out of Bourdieu's work, but quickly gained autonomy, is the literature on boundaries, with which I came to be associated. This literature tackled several related empirical problems loosely inspired by *Distinction*: for instance, the relative salience of various types of boundaries (moral, cultural, socioeconomic), again, the proprieties of group boundaries (their permeability, visibility, brightness, fuzziness, etc.), the relationship between symbolic and social boundaries (describing the symbolic as a necessary but insufficient condition for the social), and the mechanisms of boundary change (see Lamont and Molnár, 2002; Pachucki et al., 2007). A number of scholars started studying boundary work per se, and became involved in the “symbolic boundaries” network organized by the Culture Section of the American Sociological Association, which has been meeting since the mid-1990s. While the focus has included the types of classification struggle discussed by Bourdieu, it went beyond it by connecting with the tradition of Benedict Anderson (1991) in the study of imagined communities, Frederic Barth (1969) in ethnic and racial studies, the more recent writings of Richard

Jenkins (1996) on social identity, and the work of Richard Alba, Rogers Brubaker, Christopher Bail, Doug Massey, Andreas Wimmer, and others on processes of group formation and identification and the like. The idea is to consider boundary processes and characteristics (including porousness and permeability) more systematically across various fields of study and draw comparison so that, for instance, what we know about ethnic boundaries would feed our understanding of cultural and organizational boundaries, and vice-versa. This broader synthetic project is being pursued today in various literatures by sociologists working on inequality, identity, ethnicity, nationalism, poverty, social movements, and a range of other topics beyond the sociology of culture. It has also led to the development of an international research program centered on everyday antiracism, group formation, and the transformation of boundaries (Lamont and Mizrachi, forthcoming). It is significant that during the last decade, the study of boundaries has moved closer toward the center of gravity of our discipline and was featured as the theme of the 2007 meetings of the American Sociological Association. Compared with the other strands of work described above, this last strand is the one most loosely connected to the new Bourdieu-inspired doxa, but it is a significant part of it, and one that carries the influence of cultural sociology far beyond the original core.

CONCLUSION: HOW HAS BOURDIEU BEEN GOOD TO THINK WITH?

Where does that leave us? All in all, many U.S. colleagues have cultivated simultaneously multiple relationships with Bourdieu's work. We have been inspired by it, extended it, and made empirical correctives to it. We have also used it as a springboard to open new vistas and ask new questions. We have criticized its meta-theoretical assumptions. We have been very well served by it indeed. The fecundity of Bourdieu's work has fed our thinking and allowed us to redefine frontier sociology on U.S. territory, while many of us also landed desirable academic positions, worked with terrific graduate students, and benefited from the other advantages that come with productive academic lives. Bourdieu has also given us pleasure, fed our curiosity, and sustained intellectual and friendship communities—aspects of academic lives that Bourdieu underestimated (Lamont, 2009b).

This U.S. relationship with Bourdieusian sociology is very different from what is found on French soil, where Bourdieu was absolutely at the center of an academic field in permanent crisis, which experienced a true zero-sum situation in the distribution of jobs and other resources—a context in which one's stand in relation to Bourdieu and his networks could have a determining impact on one's career trajectory. If many U.S. sociologists have been able to have a more plural relationship with this work, and to be simultaneously for and against it, it is in part because they live in a very different academic

world, one where peer review and the distribution of rewards operate differently, and one where control of resources is enormously dispersed—having so many gatekeepers simultaneously at work creates conditions for intellectual freedom and autonomy. Thus, Bourdieu simply matters less in the United States, while at the same time mattering a great deal for the reasons that I just described. But in both national contexts, Bourdieu has been equally generative by helping create the conditions for a strong sociological perspective, without apologies.

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