Bourdieu Canonised?1

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Abstract: This article examines Pierre Bourdieu's canonical status among the sociologists of the second half of the 20th century. Particular attention is given to his own work, and other work inspired by his approach, on European integration and post-communist transition.

Keywords: Bourdieu, canons in social theory, European integration, post-communist transition

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One of the most recent articles I published was on the idea of 1920 as a caesura in social theory [Outhwaite 2020]. I explore here another possible caesura in English-language social theory, located around 1970, plus or minus 2. (1968 was a less dramatic year in the West than in Prague, but very influential in changing world-views, including in social theory.) I was completing my first degree in 1971, and people who work on generations rightly caution against attributing too much significance to the years of one's own coming of age. In this case, however, I think there was a substantial change of gear, in an English-speaking world in which sociology was a rising field but 'theory' had been something of a poor relation. (Having lost my European citizenship, which survives in ghostly form only until my passport expires, I should apologise for this parochial reference. The temporalities of the reception of social theorists across Europe and the rest of the world would be a massive project.)²

Gurminder K. Bhambra and John Holmwood have noted with a touch of irony that their recent book, *Colonialism and Modern Social Theory*, came out just 50 years after, and echoed the title of, Anthony Giddens' *Capitalism and Modern Social Theory* [Giddens 1971]. Around the same time as Giddens' extremely influential book we had Bourdieu's *La Reproduction* [Bourdieu 1970], following on from *Les héritiers: les étudiants et la culture* [Bourdieu 1964] and which transformed the rather dusty field of the sociology of education. In 1968 he published, with

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² On this issue in relation to Bourdieu, see for example Susen and Turner [2011].

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Jean-Claude Chamboredon and Jean-Claude Passeron, *Le métier de sociologue: Préalables épistémologiques* [Bourdieu et al. 1968] and, in 1972, his theoretical magnum opus, *Esquisse d'une théorie de la pratique*, published in English in 1977.

In 2009 I suggested that Bourdieu and Giddens constituted something like a 'canon' in late 20th-century British social theory, along with the subsequent rise of Zygmunt Bauman and Ulrich Beck. In 1970 Bourdieu, born in 1930, had been in the game for some time, while Bauman, born in 1925, had had a substantial career in Poland, until his expulsion in the antisemitic and antiliberal pogrom of 1968, and was about to pick it up again in Leeds. Giddens, born in 1938, was a young-ish lecturer at Cambridge, while Beck, born in 1944, was awarded his doctorate in 1972 and hit the news in 1986 with his book *Risikogesellschaft* (Risk Society), whose publication was soon followed by the Chernobyl nuclear disaster.

While Talcott Parsons had earlier been responsible for raising the profile of what came to be seen as classical European social theory, with as his principal protagonists Durkheim, Weber, and Pareto, in the early 1970s the main driver was probably the revival of interest in Marx, with the theorists of the turn of the century drawn in his wake, where they were not explicitly counterposed to him.³ Bauman, alone among the four, had been an explicit Marxist, and he remained massively influenced by Marx as well as by 'Simmel, who started it all' [Bauman 1992]. Bourdieu's sociology, too, could be called post-Marxist, if the term had not been attached to rather different intellectual and political projects.⁴ Giddens had to spend a good deal of time in the 1970s differentiating his approach from Marxism, whereas Beck's reference point in the 1980s was more clearly Frankfurt critical theory. Both Bourdieu and Giddens can be seen as post-structuralist thinkers, not in the usage ascribed in the English-speaking countries to Foucault, Deleuze/Guattari, and others, but in the sense that they reacted to structuralism (as well as to Goffman and to ethnomethodology).

Unlike Giddens, the other three thinkers did not on the whole go in for rediscoveries and reappraisals. Bauman published a book on *Critical Sociology* [1976] and another on *Hermeneutics and Social Science* [1978], but then moved on to more substantive topics, beginning with his book on intellectuals, *Legislators and Interpreters* [1987]. Bourdieu's *Esquisse d'une théorie de la pratique* [1972], trans-

³ Classics of the latter genre were Göran Therborn's *Science, Class and Society* [1976] and Martin Shaw's *Marxism and Social Science* [1975], and of course the work of Barry Hindess, Paul Hirst, and others. As Therborn [2000: 37] later noted, '...the multiple voices around the past turn of the century have been filtered into a canon of select classics, which still constitute most of the core that sociological education has'.

⁴ Bridget Fowler [2011: 33] calls him 'one of the great heirs of the Western Marxist tradition'. As she notes, 'Bourdieu's whole corpus brilliantly examines a central Marxist idea: the ossification of fluid individuals into a dominant class, with enduring interests and the inheritance of class powers' [Fowler 2011: 35].

⁵ His introduction to the 1999 edition of *Culture as Praxis* [Bauman 1973] traced developments over the intervening years.

lated in 1977 as *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, was in large part a critical engagement with structuralism, and the edited collection *Le Métier de sociologue* [1973], translated after a considerable lag in 1991 as *The Craft of Sociology*, inevitably included such themes. On the whole, though, Bourdieu avoided them. Beck, except in his doctoral thesis, published in 1974, entirely avoided works of expository critique.

Another important aspect for all four is the interplay between their strictly academic activities and their broader roles as public intellectuals. None of them, I think, particularly sought the latter role, whether from modesty or, particularly in Bourdieu's case, a suspicion of the cult of the intellectual in France.⁶

Why just these four? (I don't believe in either the Christian evangelists or the horsemen of the apocalypse – though for some British sociologists these four were similarly suspect as making the subject more 'continental'.) I excluded Foucault, who, like Bourdieu, enriched the similarly dusty area, at least in Britain, of the sociology of deviance but who would have hated to be called a sociologist, and Habermas, who always followed a double track in philosophy and sociology. (His friend Ralf Dahrendorf said he was always really a philosopher.) Margaret Archer probably deserved a place among these 'theory boys' [Burton 2015], but I felt that she had not had quite the same broad impact. Stuart Hall was a major figure in sociology and the emergent field of cultural studies, but not so much in sociological theory.

Conversely, several people thought there should have only been three, questioning the inclusion of Bauman as not a real sociologist, Giddens as a bit too eclectic, or Beck as too journalistic. Bourdieu was, I think, exempted from such critiques, though they might have fastened on the way in which his theoretical and methodological engine was trundled around like a medieval siege weapon from one target to another.

It is Bourdieu's versatility which makes him unique in this field. It is hard to think of a topic which he did not either address himself or at least include in the pages of the *Actes de la Recherche en Sciences Sociales*, which he founded in 1975, just after my caesura year, and which has continued since his death in 2002. No. 150, in 2003, summarised his contribution to anthropology, his other home port (though he also ranged over philosophy – for example, his book on Heidegger – art history, and feminist studies). Already in 1962 he was describing Algeria in terms of a 'choc des civilisations' and in *Homo Academicus* [Bourdieu 1984] he described processes of polarisation and the devaluation of others' expertise in the language of 'camps' and 'civil war' – something which we are all too conscious of today [Outhwaite 2022]. It could be argued that we are currently experiencing

⁶ See his sardonic discussion in Appendix 3 to *Homo Sociologicus* of 'The Hit Parade of French Intellectuals' [Bourdieu, 1988 [1984]: 256–270]. For a more recent study, see Jean-pierre and Natanson [2008]. Bourdieu did, of course, eventually come to embrace the role of militant public sociologist.

a kind of fusion of Bourdieu's 'crises of reproduction' and 'political crises' (produced by exogenous shocks), with social media as a possible example of such a shock.

In the rest of this talk, I shall focus on the two areas of Bourdieu's work which I have addressed in most detail: *postcommunist transition* and *European integration*. Larry Ray and I, in our book in 2005, noted that along with the return of capital in its literal or 'western' sense, the postcommunist world was reconfiguring other forms of capital central to Bourdieu's conceptualisation, as well as to that of others such as James Coleman and Robert Putnam [Grix 2001]. To give a crude example, the exchange rate in the former satellites between competence in Russian and that in English, French, or German changed as abruptly as when the rouble was devalued by 90% while I was on a short visit to Moscow. (The hotel cashier without blinking gave me nearly 100 times more roubles for my pounds than when I had seen her a couple of days earlier.)

In our analysis, Larry Ray and I cited the slightly comic but then current example of groups of Russians estimating the value of their collective expertise and asking banks to match it with a business loan. A decade earlier, Bourdieu [1983: 55] had noted, in the context of ostensibly meritocratic social selection in Western societies, that 'the more the official transmission of capital is prevented or hindered, the more the effects of the clandestine circulation of capital in the form of cultural capital become determinant in the reproduction of the social structure'.

What Konrád and Szelényi [1979] had described as the 'intellectualisation' of the communist bureaucracy, a process also described by Peter Ludz [1968] in his *Parteielite im Wandel*, has also inspired Eyal, Szelényi, and Townsley's subsequent work. In our book we mentioned the rapid development by postcommunist elites of a 'sense of the game', which parallels, we suggested, the role of Weber's 'Protestant ethic' in early capitalism [Outhwaite and Ray 2005: 32].⁷

I returned to this theme in 2007, noting that although Bourdieu did not write much about this part of the world, the exception which proves the rule is a short lecture given in East Berlin on 25 October 1989, and reprinted under the title 'The Soviet Variant and Political Capital', in *Practical Reason* [Bourdieu 1998: 14–18]. Here he again raised the question whether, 'in a system which officially and to a large extent in practice outlaws economic capital, the relative weight of cultural capital...is proportionally increased' [ibid.: 16]. He went on to address the issue of the conflict between the nomenklatura, with its political capital, and the bearers of academic capital. If I may be allowed to quote what I wrote there:

⁷ See also the exchange between Eyal, Szelényi, Townsley, and Michael Burawoy [2001] and the fascinating account of Chechnya by Georgi Derlugian [2005]. More recently, Ly Chu [2018] has applied a similar approach in relation to Vietnam. Chu's PhD thesis can be found at: https://openaccess.city.ac.uk/id/eprint/16166/.

...as the Czech sociologist Petr Mateju (2002–3: 380) writes, postcommunism has been an ideal laboratory for testing Bourdieu's hypotheses regarding the role of various forms of capital and their conversions in the reproduction of inequality and in shaping life-success. Bourdieu's model of social stratification, which lays especial importance on cultural or symbolic capital ... can indeed be shown to be of particular relevance to the post-communist world, in which, as Georges Mink (2004: 462) puts it, individuals have to get by in a system which they did not know how to read from the start. [Outhwaite 2007]

To cut a long story short, whereas Putnam's analyses of Italy and the US tend to treat social capital as a public good, and something which unproblematically conduces to social development, Bourdieu's focus is closer to Marx in looking at the way in which these forms of capital and the ways in which they are used by their bearers reinforce social inequalities and antagonisms between classes. This is a system in which foreign contacts, languages, and so on may be more important for individual life-chances than economic resources or formal qualifications derived from the communist period.

This is a persisting effect, as noted by Kovách and Kučerová [2006], in what they aptly call a 'project class' of well-educated young semi-professionals equipped to apply for and manage EU and other externally funded projects. As one German respondent complained in Špaček's study of the Saxon-Czech border region,

I would say that in our region the language barrier is the biggest problem, because it makes it very hard to have easy everyday contacts to somebody on the other side of the border. Just take the phone and call somebody is for most of the people in our region more or less impossible. [Špaček 2018: 193]

Here I move to the theme of European integration, which I addressed briefly in 2016 and more substantially in 2017, and in my most recent book in 2019. In a chapter for the new edition of the *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Social Theory* [Delanty and Turner 2022], I realised there was more to say about Bourdieu in relation to this than I'd initially thought. Again with apologies for quoting myself, here are the relevant paragraphs:

Like his contemporary Alain Touraine (1994), Pierre Bourdieu only occasionally referred to European integration, and in Bourdieu's case pejoratively: Niilo Kauppi (2018: xix) writes that 'For him, European integration was nothing more than a capitalist project. He did not see anything productive in it.' Bourdieu however increasingly saw Europe as the appropriate base for social movement activity as his work took on a more activist character. In resisting neoliberalism, a special place should belong to 'the state: the nation-state, or better yet the supranational state – a European state on the way toward a world state – capable of effectively controlling and taxing the profits earned in the financial markets and, above all, of counteracting the destructive impact that the latter have on the labour market'. [Bourdieu 1998]

As Kauppi (2018: 56) points out, in the EU, 'in contrast to national settings such as France analyzed by Bourdieu, a multitude of highly structured national political spaces are partly united by a more heterogenous transnational space.' Yet Kauppi and many other scholars have used a Bourdieusian framework to analyse the European 'field', in which political actors mobilise national and European political resources and exchange one for the other. Much of this work has centred on the European Parliament, which has proved a valuable site for smaller parties and women politicians marginalised or excluded in their home states (Kauppi 2005). There are also major studies of the Commission and the broader field of 'Eurocracy' (Shore 2000; Georgakakis 2009; 2010; 2013; 2018) and the crucial role of EU law in the integration process (Vauchez and de Witte 2013).

The variant of a Bourdieusian approach developed by Luc Boltanski and his various collaborators in their 'sociology of critique' has been less prominent so far [Outhwaite and Spence 2014]. Without going into the disputed question of how far Boltanski and his collaborators diverge from Bourdieu [Fournier 2022: 54–55], it is worth mentioning that Boltanski's emphasis on the fluidity of social life, the idea of regimes of argumentation, justification, and épreuves is well suited to the essentially contested space of the EU and its blend of what Keith Middlemas [1995: xx] called its formal and 'informal politics'. To cut a long story short, Member State representatives are constrained both to demonstrate expertise and to frame their arguments in terms of the common interest of the Union. In a more direct link to Bourdieu, studies of European Commission officials might look back (and perhaps have done) at the distinction which he and Monique de Saint Martin drew in 1982 in their study of French bishops, between the 'oblates', who have spent their whole lives in the clergy, and the 'héritiers', who join the episcopacy after earlier careers outside and arrive with external intellectual and social capital [see Bourdieu and de Saint Martin 1982; Robbins 2019: 199–200; 2022: 131–138].9

Ann Zimmermann and Adrian Favell [2011: 507] make a powerful case for the complementarity of the three main contemporary theoretical approaches to the EU represented by Foucault, Bourdieu, and Habermas:

The notion of governmentality provides an account of macro-structural transformation of the EU seeking to redefine the object of study in a new language of politics. [...] The political field approach, rather, concentrates more on micro-structural transformation: politics at the level of actors, their identities and relationships, and

704

⁸ Cris Shore, who had earlier conducted an ethnographic study of the European Commission, quoted one official's definition of the Commission as 'a civil service with attitude' [Shore 2000: 143].

⁹ The term 'héritiers' is of course also used in Bourdieu's study of students' cultural capital. Incidentally, Jules Monnerot wrote ironically of French 'sociologie établie (au sens où les Anglais disent l'Église établie)' [Hollier 1995: 572].

their struggles in particular contexts. The public sphere approach sits somewhere in the middle, focusing on meso-level transformations in European society associated with the EU as it creates new public debates about Europe.

The possible intersections between these approaches to the EU reflect broader affinities, also with Elias [Georgakakis and Weisbein 2010], which were not developed at the time and were cut short by the early deaths of Foucault in 1984 and Bourdieu in 2002. To put it very briefly, I would suggest that a critical theory approach (which is not confined to public sphere issues) engages most fully with the challenges and *enjeux* of the integration project, while the other two provide valuable reminders of the power games behind what the 'object language' (as Kauppi describes it) of European public servants tends to describe in overly irenic and optimistic terms. The enrichment of EU studies by these theoretical currents reflects the gradual emergence of Europe from national blinkers and its academic expression in what Hermínio Martins [1974] and later Ulrich Beck called 'methodological nationalism'.

I met Bourdieu only once, in 1984, when we were both on the road in Toulouse. He was presenting and signing *La Distinction* and I was there to give a paper in the wake of Orwell on political language in East and West [Outhwaite 1986]. This was also the year in which Bourdieu wrote a preface to the English edition of *Distinction* [Robbins 2019: 201] and in which Polity Press was founded in Cambridge by Giddens, John Thompson, and David Held and began to publish him. As Derek Robbins [2019] has noted, this was also the decade in which Bourdieu reflected more systematically on his own position in the intellectual field, beginning with his inaugural lecture at the Collège de France in 1982.

Bourdieu was also travelling abroad more in the 1980s, and his international reputation probably reinforced that in France. Although the term globalisation was not current until the 1990s, intellectual life was becoming more global, not least in France, where translated academic works became strikingly more prominent in the bookstores. Bourdieu [1996: 145] complained, however, in a rather prickly paper, that 'texts such as mine, produced in a definite position in a definite state of the French intellectual or academic field, have little chance of being grasped without distortion in the American field...'. This should probably not be seen as narcissism; Robbins [2019: 207] suggests that the tendency in the US to understand his work in terms of that country's own rather rigid disciplinary boundaries may be the explanation. Bourdieu returned to this theme in an essay on 'The Social Conditions of the International Circulation of Ideas' [Bourdieu 1999].

Bourdieu would of course have hated the notion of canonicity. In *Homo Academicus* he uses it only of academic disciplines, following (and citing) Kant's

¹⁰ This happened later also to Thomas Piketty [Walsh and Lehmann 2021: 30].

¹¹ See, for instance, his chapter on 'the philosophical institution' [Bourdieu 1983].

'conflict of the faculties', though more relevant in this context, he cites, in the Preface to the English translation,

the astonishment of a certain young American visitor ... to whom I had to explain that all his intellectual heroes, like Althusser, Barthes, Deleuze, Derrida and Foucault ... held marginal positions in the university system... [Bourdieu 1984: xviii]

It is, however, hard to see how Bourdieu can escape his canonical status. Marcel Fournier [2022: 49, 57] puts him 'on the level of Durkheim, Marx, Weber, or Parsons' and calls him 'our last classical sociologist'. The test of time has not run so long for Bourdieu as for these others, but I should also reiterate my admiration for his astonishingly productive and inspiring work.

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