CULTURAL CAPITAL: A KEYWORD OR A CATCHWORD?

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ABSTRACT

The concept of cultural capital is highly popular in the social sciences and humanities. Yet, its usefulness as a research tool is often taken for granted. Meanwhile, the present paper attempts to show that if anything should be evident about the cultural capital, it is its negative, harmful rather than valuable character. The concept is under-specified: it overlaps related concepts denoting other forms of capital, such as social and human capital. The capital analogy is totally misplaced, since the concept, as it is commonly defined, does not meet any conditions of real, that is, economic capital.

Cultural capital theory, as developed notably by Pierre Bourdieu, comprises also class theory, which, however, is of poor quality, mixing up some class, e.e. economic ownership, criteria with those pertinent to stratification, and adding insult to injury-not differentiating between those and social estates, i.e. units of social differentiation in the non-economic domain. As a result, the key thesis of theory regarding social reproduction is not supported by evidence. Finally, the term “cultural capital” upon scrutiny proves to be entangled in the fallacy of contradicito in terminis. Thus, though its unclear relationship to capital stricto sensu might suggest that the concept is something of a metaphor, in fact it is rather an oxymoron. Needless to say, just this feature-and there are a host of other flaws- causes that the concept should be discarded out of hand.

KEY WORDS: cultural capital, Bourdieu, capital”he learnt how to spell ‘banana’ but did not know where to stop’.the jibe made at Milton Friedman by Paul Samuelson;quoted in (Fine 2001:46)
INTRODUCTION

The concept of cultural capital has gained currency in recent years. The phenomenon should be seen as a part of a broader trend, consisting in the promiscuous application of the term ‘capital’ to a diversity of extra-economic phenomena and processes. By the same token, an examination of whether the cultural capital framework stands up to theoretical scrutiny becomes even more important, since its subject is also an instance of a more general proliferation of non-economic capitals across the social sciences and humanities.

OVERLAPS

As this section shows, the aforementioned visibility of new capitals family has some unforeseen consequences.

Schneider (2004:14) notes that:

some scholars substitute cultural for social capital or subsume cultural capital under social capital. Coleman (1988) includes mores and norms of the group as part of social capital. Fukuyama (1995:90) uses social capital to refer to the culture of particular societies, stating that social capital depends on ‘a prior sense of moral community, that is, an unwritten set of ethical rules or norms that serve as the basis for social trust’. According to another definition, ‘social capital […] includes: 1) trust-based relationships with people or organizations with access to resources and 2) knowledge of cultural capital cues that indicate that an individual is a member of a group and should be given access to those relationships’ (Schneider 2006).

Shifting the point of departure, what the following assertion refers to as cultural capital, might be equally well defined—remaining within the capital vernacular—as social capital: ‘For many traditional college students, the home is a valuable resource for support and counsel. […] many nontraditional students do not have this form of cultural capital available to them’ (Valadez 2008:37).

Small wonder that a desperate cultural capital researcher disarmingly confesses regarding the two constructs involved that ‘these concepts are hard to disentangle. Therefore, this study, similar to past research [references omitted] simultaneously observes social and cultural capital, such that the variables I use as proxies for social and cultural capital are not necessarily assigned to one type of capital or the other’ (Wells 2008).

The scholar in question apparently is not aware that by the same token he has dealt a fatal blow to the concept concerned— if one cannot differentiate between cultural and social capital, then the concept of cultural capital as having no separate subject matter of its own makes no logical and analytical sense. The phrase ‘fatal blow’ overstates the issue, considering an unending stream of definitions conforming to the pattern outlined above, i.e. at least partially overlapping.

Such a lack of discrimination is manifested, inter alia, by the leading champions of the ‘neo-capitalist’ stream:

‘For Bourdie social networks are […] a result of deliberate investment of cultural as well as economic resources. Norms[...] and sanctions are considered a major source of social capital (Coleman, 1988; Portes, 1998). However, norms are culturally constructed (Hofstede, 1980), and as such, ‘networks are best seen as primarily cultural phenomena’ (Lin 2007).’

this peculiar justification implies an untenable view of causation wherein on the basis of an influence exerted by certain forms of what is considered culture it is inferred that the object of that influence thereby itself becomes cultural in nature.

The extent of intellectual derangement and spread of ‘anything goes’ policy can be seen from the following veritable mishmash: ‘In general terms, social capital (socio-cultural capital, cultural capital) refers to a society's capability to deal with social, economic and environmental problems and be active in shaping the development of the overall system. It consists of socio-cultural values and norms, learned preferences, human capital and labor force, local knowledge of the environment, social competence and institutions, human health and life expectancy, as well as cultural and social integrity and social cohesion.’ (Berks, Folke 1994:128-149).

The above statement -for all its incredible breadth-reveals that social capital is not the only neighbour of cultural capital whose territory is exposed to infringement ON THE PART OF THIS SELF-proclaimed CONQUISTADOR, as the following quotation, involving not two but all three forms of capital, clearly shows: ‘companies nurture and support the ‘cultural capital-nonmonetary skills, knowledge and relationships generated outside the workplace’(Sharrod 2005).

In the following statement human capital—recall, commonly defined in terms of education—is again deemed a variety of its cultural relative: ‘Nearly all the consumer informants possessed limited amounts of economic capital and institutional cultural capital in the form of formal education’(Adkins, Corus 2009).

It only adds to our concept’s ambiguity when (just as in the case of social capital) some authors identify it not with the outcome of education but with some of factors that might affect it, as in the following definition: ‘The term cultural capital represents the collection of non-economic forces such as family background, social class, varying investments in and commitments to education, different resources, etc. which influence academic success’(Hayes).

The above definition reveals also an important reason for the flaws in the cultural capital approach; in framing social class as a non-economic factor, it manifests a reified, non-sociological view of the economy. When one fails to recognise that
economic relations, including capital, are inherently social relations, then such an abstract, purportedly free-floating concept of capital adheres to non-economic phenomena much better than its alternative, not castrated out of its socio-economic substance.

In those attempts, their authors follow, as might be expected, in Pierre Bourdieu’ footsteps. Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron first used the term in ‘Cultural Reproduction and Social Reproduction’ (1973). In this work he attempted to explain differences in children’s scholastic outcomes in France during the 1960s. It has been further elaborated and developed in terms of higher education in The State Nobility (1996).

In Distinction, forms of capital are presented as real entities: ‘the overall volume of capital, understood as the set of actually useable resources and powers—economic capital, cultural capital and also social capital’ (Bourdieu 1984: 114).

In this formulation ‘also’ is the key word as social capital effectively drops from Bourdieu’s vision, being subsumed under economic and cultural capital. In Language and Symbolic Power, a series of essays written between 1977 and 1982 (Bourdieu 1991 b), social capital appears along with economic capital, cultural capital, and symbolic capital as the principal fields which combine to constitute the social position of any particular person, but the inter-relation of these concepts is not explored. The elaboration of forms of capital continues in Homo Academicus (Bourdieu 1988), with social capital now appearing alongside yet new forms of capital such as academic capital or the capital of services rendered. Social capital, however, is also highlighted in the text in that it constitutes half of the domain from which the highly orthodox, explanatory quantitative variables are drawn (Bourdieu 1988: Table 1, Appendix 1).

The evocative use of the concept ‘capital’, with its promiscuous proliferation of varieties, was reined in by Bourdieu in 1982 in an essay on ‘The Forms of Capital’ (Bourdieu 1997). While acknowledging the primacy of economic capital in his previous work, Bourdieu had tended to stress cultural capital, with social capital a very distant third. In a subtle shift of position Bourdieu posits a unitary capital which ‘can present itself in three fundamental guises’ (1997: 47), economic, cultural, and social. (Field, Schuller, Baron 2000).

As if this ambiguity were not enough, Bourdieu over-stretches the concept under consideration in other ways as well:

Within cultural capital Bourdieu (1986:243) focuses on ‘physical capital’ as consisting in ‘long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body’ that carry with them particular social and cultural meanings that set parameters for individual action and serve to reproduce and legitimize structures of inequality. When class inequality is conceptualized in this way, the differences that establish the broadly defined categories of upper, middle, and lower class are more than just differences in access to material, cultural, and social resources. Instead, they are differences that are actually embodied. In other words, class inequality can find expression in embodied ways, such as physical appearance, pronunciation, stride, style, posture, Body language, diet, handwriting, and so on. […] individuals possessing particular valued bodily traits are more able to exchange these physical properties for other valued resources. In this way, Bourdieu views the corporeal as a form of currency that results in the unequal accumulation of material resources and, by extension, an important contributor to class inequality (Perks 2012).

There are several problems with the conception laid out above. Firstly, contrary to what has been written above, it does not refer to social class; the terms used are in fact those drawn from stratification theories, which all depict society in hierarchical terms, whereas the latter do not pertain to class structures, which are more complex in nature.

Secondly, it assumes a peculiar concept of the physical where both the body and mind are recognised at par as physical objects. This is all the more odd that Bourdieu points also to the symbolic nature of what he defines as cultural capital. To consider human consciousness as nothing more than as a set of energetic, at the end of the day material impulses of the brain is to indulge in a form of crude, naive materialism. This kind of vulgar materialism turns out to be infectious at that; an author of an sketch on the various form of capital, inclusive of cultural, drawing on the well-known Bourdieu’s essay, states: ‘We define forms of capital as communication resources/power/energy’ (Wang 2009). Another follower of the influential thinker in question refers to ‘the direct producers of the work in its materiality (artist, writer, etc.)(Gracy 2007).

Naturally, the fact that a painting, or a book appears in a material guise does by any means entail that the cultural objects in question are material, not ideal objects. For what matters in their case, the reason why a particular painting, or a poem are admired, is not their material form, but, conversely – ideational content. While indulging in this crude materialism or physicalism Bourdieu subscribes to the long tradition of French philosophy: recall, e.g., La Mettrie. This, needless to say constitute no justification for adopting this by no means just antiquarian doctrine- as it has been apparently galvanised by successes of neuroscience, and at an another plane, genetics in recent years.

This assessment of the Bourdelian notion, of course, calls into question its interpretation as one which ‘represents the social-structural change from materialism to postmaterialism’(Kim, Kim 2008), which claim becomes less surprising given the same authors’ subsumption of even ‘environnement into the mental sphere rather than the physical one’, thus going to the opposite extreme than his mentor above.

Besides, the definition referring to dispositions, etc. overlaps, to a degree that it becomes indistinguishable from, another Bourdieu’s notion of habitus; after all, habitus is often defined as dispositions that are inculcated in the family but manifest themselves in different ways in each individual. (Harker 1990:10; Webb et al. 2002:37;)

This is not the end of the story; alongside this outward expansion, another mechanism of growth is in the case of the
currently construct concerned its subdivision:

The capital (valued resource) at stake in the field of theology is the Christian symbol system […]

To further complicate matters, there are subfields with more specific forms of cultural capital, for example, biblical studies
with the cultural capital of biblical languages and archeology, church history with its specific capital of historiography,
medical ethics with its knowledge of medical science, etc. (Sanks 2007)

Yet another form of cultural capital is distinguished in the following reference to ‘cultural institutions in their role as the
creators and sustainers of objectified cultural capital’ (Gracey 2007).

What is at stake here is simply culture as commonly, within the common-sense thought, understood[,] and the adjective
‘capital’ is utterly redundant, adding nothing to the content of the concept, and indeed, misleading in suggesting that
ordinary books on library shelves or microfilms in archives/examples used by the author) are analogous to economic
capital by virtue of being ideal, symbolic objects in question(as though, referring to another phrase used , given institutions
were linked to crediting rather than accrediting organisations).

The aforementioned cultural capital scholar attempts, to be sure, to defend the specific linguistic combination represented
by the concept under consideration, yet her justification is singularly unconvincing;she refers to ‘cultural institutions in their
role as the creators and sustainers of objectified cultural capital. […] cultural heritage is a form of capital that can be
accumulated, shared, transferred, and otherwise manipulated by both individuals and institutions, and that the control of
significant amounts of cultural capital confers a certain power to the possessor’ (Gracey 2007).

Accumulation and transferability, as tied to objectification also mentioned above) are precisely criteria commonly
associated with the concept of culture in a usual anthropological sense[,] and the world ‘manipulation’ is so broad that it fits
a variety of objects, due to which it cannot be made use of in order to justify the phrase of cultural capital. Similar
generally characterises the word ‘power’ and it even less fits in the role of rational for the adoption and use of the concept
of cultural capital. For instance, there is in current the phrase ‘purchasing power’ which means that each individual
commanding a certain amount of money has the ability to enter into possession of a range of goods available in the
market, but it does not follow that each such sum of money is a capital; money capital is something different from money
used to purchase consumer goods.

The second component of culture as conventionally considered refers to social consciousness, which, as it might have
been expected, is also present in the cultural capital literature. A case in point is the following phrase referring to ‘the
cultural capital of modernity and whiteness(Lattas 2011). It is also to this kind of belief that the claim concerning ‘The
White Eurocentric cultural capital imposed as the ‘standard’ or ‘mainstream’ in U.S. society’(Urrieta 2009) refers to.

This breadth allows its advocates to make equally exaggerated claims on cultural capitals purported importance, as in the
following stunning assertion: ‘the crystalized capitalist profit structure cannot be obtained only with economic capital without the
proper role of cultural capital’ (Kim, Kim 2007). The only thinkable justification for this mind-boggling claim may be a kind of
pseudo-dialectics in which everything connects with, and affects everything else.

CAPITAL: A SCIENTIFIC CONSTRUCT OR HAZY METAPHOR?

That the takeovers discussed above dilute the explanatory power of cultural capital to the point of notional can be seen
from the following argument: ‘Most academics and administrators are not compensated at the level that their education,
status, and experience would garner in business or industry. In the absence of sufficient real capital, the cultural capital of
the academic world — recognition — is especially important. We live for and thrive on (whether we admit it to ourselves or
not) the recognition of our colleagues, peers, disciplines, and institutions’ (Olson 2006).

The first contention is perhaps true, but it does not follow that it is the same with its purported corollary- again, the point on
the importance of recognition in the academic world is well put (as distinct from equating ‘real capital’ and compensation),
only that it has nothing in common with the validation of a similar role pertaining to cultural capital. Why should
professional recognition, critical acclaim, prestige, etc., be regarded as a form of capital, if none of those phenomena
possesses intrinsic attributes of real capital, as the author himself calls it, such as: alienability, exchangeability into other
goods, etc. Even granted-what itself is extremely problematic-that ‘cultural capital’, brings in its holder some benefits or
rewards, it is immediately evident that the nature of those is vastly different from those yielded by capital stricto sensu.
While an owner of fixed and variable capital may reasonably expect that it will give her a certain amount of profit (after
selling the commodities produced by a given labour power) which expectations may of course fail, in the case of cultural
capital no such process comes into play. The connection between possessing a huge collection of books by one’s parents
and one’s professional or business success is so distant, i.e. mediated by this many social and economic variables, that
no one can count on the attainment of the latter with a degree of certainty even remotely close to one pertaining to the
capitalist situation.

Hence, the following attempt to defend the capital character of cultural capital: ‘As the word ‘capital’ implies, cultural capital
is an asset that can be used to acquire other kinds of assets, such as educational credentials’ (Wildhagen 2009) is abortive-
nothing like a monetary transaction takes place there; moreover, the aforementioned scholar commits a chronic error of
confounding two very different relations: direct and indirect one, that is to say, familiarity with high culture could be of
assistance in acquiring education, but it not in the least an immediate means of this acquisition, and only then one could
compare it with money as a medium of exchange (which, mind you, would be still a far cry from capital, since by any means
every sum of money can be described as capital).
Even more surprising, and inaccurate is the definition of cultural capital by Bourdieu himself as a ‘conventional, constant, legally-guaranteed value with respect to culture’ (1986:248). Firstly, the phrase ‘constant value’ flies in the face of our argument outlined above. Secondly, the French scholar clearly overlays the social relevance and efficacy of law. Secondly, another definition interprets ‘culture’ as ‘cultural capital’ in an entirely arbitrary and unfounded manner: ‘Culture becomes cultural capital when specific elements of a culture are used to identify someone as a member of a group. Cultural capital is a commodification of a particular culture or subculture that individuals or organizations can use through social capital to access resources of that group. These cultural capital cues can be subtle social patterns or clear symbols, such as speaking a particular dialect or reference to specific political beliefs’ (Schneider 2004:14).

Why should a dialect or political belief become commodities, remains a puzzle. The same applies to the use of the noun ‘capital’; even supposing—for the sake of argument- the broadest possible (and hence invalid) concept of capital equating it with any unspecified resources or advantages, the definition cited above does not hold water- ‘capital’ is there understood merely as a means of accessing benefits, and not as a mechanism for their generation.

Another definition belonging to the same family permits us to pinpoint the source of the fallacy involved even more accurately: ‘Within the African American context, cultural capital can be defined as ‘the sense of group consciousness and collective identity that serves as an economic resource to support collective economic or philanthropic efforts’ (Ward 1992). Granted that the forms of consciousness indicated above may affect economic action, this still does not liken, let alone equate them to economic capital. To use a given thing in producing profit is not the same as this process being subject to some influence on the part of another thing; in other words, direct and indirect relationships should not be identified with each other.

This analysis shows that the term being discussed is not as much a scientific concept as-at best-a rather fuzzy metaphor whose indiscriminate use can be highly misleading, as the following example-based, as it does on an extremely stylised notion of investment, epitomises: ‘Capital, in our definition, not only refers to the economic capital, but also includes the non-economic forms of capital by our raising natural, political, cultural (including human capital), social, and symbolic capital, which, however, have the same properties as economic capital, i.e., the investment and the conversion character. (Bourdieu 1986, Wang 2006)

CULTURAL CAPITAL AND CLASS.

The issue of class is important both intrinsically and for its connection with the question of social inequalities. Declaratively, the French thinker distanced himself against Marxism, but in practice he took over, albeit in an erratic fashion, a considerable part of Marx's legacy in the field of class theory, using, e.g., categories such as the petty bourgeoisie or working class. Curiously enough, capitalists are replaced by entrepreneurs, and, worse, the concepts of classes mingle with professional groups and strata such as the middle classes, higher classes etc. Meanwhile, the basic model, instead of making them more prominent, obliterates the boundaries between classes and estates (this used by both Marx and Weber concept can be interpreted to denote social groups grounded in non-economic property relations), which derives from its dependence on the concept of multiple capitals criticised above.

Bourdieu distinguishes the dominant class due to the size of the economic capital and cultural heritage. These include industrialists, managers of the private sector and university professors. At the opposite extreme is the working class including labourers and farm workers. Between these classes emerges the middle class, i.e. small business owners, technicians, secretaries or primary school teachers. The French sociologist also divides the dominant class due to the predominance of the capital. Industrialists and trade staff have a larger stock of economic capital compared to professors and artistic producers, but in turn those have a larger stock of cultural capital (Weininger 2002, 123–124).

Whilst the Bourdelian conflation of stratification and class systems has been touched on above, and corroborated by Viinstra (2007), who notes in this connection that, e.g., ‘for Bourdieu, economic capital [is] deemed equal to income and wealth’, which are typical criteria employed by a host of stratification theories, the above statement adds to the picture in that the concept of middle class refers actually to a social stratum-as the label itself suggests, the substantive referent of the concept is placed in a hierarchy-between upper and lower class.

Moreover, Weininger's faithful depiction of Bourdieu's conception makes it clear how poor the latter's understanding of social differentiation actually was.

To put in one bag ‘technicians, secretaries and primary school teachers’ is not only to reveal one’s lack of appreciation of labour power as a criterion of class identification, but also to confound class with non-class dimensions of social differentiation; primary school teachers, for instance, are a non-economic grouping. The term of secretaries is too general, lacking any sensible ground for determining their location in the structure of societal differentiation, since people designated by the term may function throughout the social division of labour. Somewhat similar is the problem of technicians; even if one were to confine the category to industry (which is unfounded), a specific technician may perform an entirely different work, hold a different type of labour power, and thus to belong to a different class than his or her peer bearing the same occupational title; they can function as supervisors and lower-level managers, for instance, but also as producers of intellectual means of production. The remaining claims make equally little sense. It may, but also may not be the case that an industrialist possesses more economic capital than an artistic producer or even university professor, since in the latter case it depends only on concrete circumstances whether a given lecturer is, or is not an owner of a stockholding whose value may well be higher than the worth of capital held by a small factory owner, for instance. And there are many multimillionaire film producers. The concept of ‘trade staff’ is, first, also broad, and, second, the relation of particular individuals involved to capital ownership may be extremely diverse.
Weaknesses of Bourdieu’s approach are evident for others as well; Kingston’s (2001) assertion, however, which clearly shows this kind of awareness: ‘Bourdieu did not offer a fixed or operationally clear-cut class schema’ is an understatement - the preceding suggests that the concept of class in Bourdieu’s rendition is a misnomer, as it lumps together real socio-economic classes, social strata and social estates, i.e. non-economic groupings.

But there is more to the matter of semantic and logical flaws displayed by the construct under consideration.

For Bourdieu, 1973: 101), objective classes are described as ‘the set of agents who are placed in the homogeneous conditions of existence imposing homogeneous conditionings and producing homogeneous systems of dispositions capable of generating similar practices’. […] Bourdieu’s account is […] descriptive and tautological, as practices generate similar practices and the middle classes always win. (Marshall 1998).

Given this kind of framework, it is small wonder that the above-mentioned reference to the concept of labour power is, in keeping with the misnomer rule, cryptic rather than explicit. In consequence, the Bourdelian framework has attracted criticism levelled against its lack of consideration of gender. Robinson & Garnier (1986) draws attention to the lack of interest in gender inequalities in the labour market in Bourdieu’s work. This is indeed true, but it is important to see this criticism in a broader context, as this gap is directly related to the aforementioned lack of labour power in the conceptual armoury of the French sociologist. Investigating ownership of labour power in the context of labour power market, one arrives at the necessity of distinguishing aspiritive labour power whose one of important characteristics is the possibility of (negative and positive) discrimination as based on some attributes of a given labour power, such as gender. Given the evident relationship of labour power and class, the point just made permits to see that there is no contradiction between gender and class relations so that criticisms of Bourdieu for his neglect of gender inequalities as allegedly caused by his over-emphasis on class does not stand up to scrutiny.

In the relevant literature other implicit references to the notion of aspiritive labour power can be found, as e.g. in (Lareau and Horvat 1999) where being white is defined as a form of cultural capital.

If one uses such notions as class, status and, of course, capital in such an under-theorised and loose way as the representatives of the cultural capital school do, then no wonder one must face the music. The drawbacks discussed above pave the way for the following query which is to concern class, but in fact concerns stratification instead: Do people actually use cultural concerns in making social distinctions, in deciding who is above and below them? ‘Not significantly’, answered Lamont (1992) on the basis of a series of qualitative interviews, probing the symbolic boundaries that the members of so-called upper-middle-class invoked to separate themselves from others and, reciprocally, to define their own sense of group identity.

It turns out that in constructing their own symbolic boundaries, these individuals ‘expressed little concern about cultural orientations—decidedly less than they did about moral and economic considerations. […] Their accounts, then, directly challenge Bourdieu’s argument that cultural distinctions play a significant role in social reproduction’ (Kingston 2001).

CULTURAL CAPITAL AND SOCIAL REPRODUCTION

The final sentence of the above quotation refers to the most famous thesis developed within the cultural capital framework.

In 1970 the highly influential ‘Reproduction’ (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977) laid out a theory of how cultural reproduction fosters the social reproduction of the relations between groups and classes. The central but curiously ill-defined explanatory gambit of this text is the use of the concept of ‘capital’. Different forms of capital appear through the book, each without proper definition: economic capital (implicitly), cultural capital, linguistic capital, scholastic capital, social capital. Cultural capital is the most developed of these, being used to explain how the cultural ‘judgement’ of the dominant group is presented as universal and selectively endowed, allowing it to legitimize its domination (Field, Schuller, Baron 2000).

Thus, the three aforementioned commentators fully corroborate the thrust of our argument in ‘The Missing Link’ section. Whilst identifying a key theoretical flaw in the whole capital edifice, the commentators in question show that Bourdieu’s conception is equally weak on the empirical side: ‘The contrast between sophisticated theoretical claims and weak empirical data is stark. Mechanisms of cultural reproduction and social reproduction are operationalized through the simple crosstabulation of percentages of, for example, working/middle/upper class students by male/female by above/below twelve out of 20 in a particular test (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977: 81, Table 5). While statistical analysis later became more complex, the problem of operationalizing non-tangible ‘capitals’ has remained significant’ (Field, schuller, Baron 2000).

Whether the theoretical apparatus employed by the French thinker is that sophisticated, is debatable; the authors of that judgment seem to conflate sophistication with elaboration, or, more precisely, over-elaboration. What is far less uncontroversial, however, is that the output of the said apparatus is not supported by empirical evidence:
Bourdieu and Passeron (1977), in developing the concept of cultural capital and habitus sought to explain how schools, despite their relative autonomy from social structures, reproduced economic and social relations. As with the straight reproduction model, however, empirical evidence for this explanation is weak. Similarly, the treatment of the cultural capital of elites as unproblematically dominant without any attention to resistant other cultures means that we are still far from understanding how cultural capital works. (Munn 2002)

This may be an under-statement, considering that ‘one influential social reproduction argument concerns the special importance of cultural capital: that the odds in school are stacked particularly heavily in favour of children and youth whose parents are the well-placed insiders in a society’s educational and cultural institutions, the cultural elite. […] Bourdieu’s particular claim is that in order to succeed, especially in the selective stages of the system, you also need to be at ease with the life style which is taken for granted among those who have high status in this social field: the nuances of language, the aesthetic preferences, and other symbolic expressions which mark the insider against the outsider. Such elements are not just accoutrements of cultural privilege, according to Bourdieu; they serve as prerequisites for success’ (LAUGIQ 2000)

Fortunately enough, there are data that cast some light on this hypothesis.

It would seem that the further one’s origin is from a country’s cultural elite, the fewer are one’s chances of doing well in school. By this line of reasoning, immigrant children should be destined to fail in school.

Very often, immigrant parents do not speak with ease the language of the country to which they have moved, let alone master its more socially exclusive nuances. Not being familiar with the education system from their own experience, immigrants should be at a disadvantage in helping their children navigate through it. Excepting those few who belong to a jet-setting international elite, the parents’ grasp of the life-style subtleties of the form of cultural capital into whose ambit they have moved would be poor. Apart from the disadvantage due to having an immigrant background as such, the chances of failing in school are greater when the parents are poor, when parents secure menial jobs, and/or had little schooling. Insofar as immigrant groups are disproportionately in these social categories, the educational prospects of youth from immigrant background should be dim.

Further, if the family belongs to a ‘visible minority’ typical of those who have migrated to the ‘the North’ from a developing country, there is racist exclusion which could cause outright opposition to the ‘white man’s school’ and channel immigrant youth towards a future in an ethnically distinct new ‘underclass’. Social reproduction theory would also imply that among immigrants the principles of reproduction would broadly apply as among non-immigrants: that the relative educational success of children would mirror their family’s social class and relative possession of cultural capital. (LAUGIQ 2000)

Meanwhile, intuition or common sense are not the best adviser in scholarly matters. So it is fully proper to query: ‘Does the weight of research evidence support such pessimistic hypotheses?’

Pre-empting the conclusion it is fair to say, immigrant Youth Doing ‘Surprisingly Well’, Before presenting the data, let us consider the possible reason for this empirical defeat.

His numerous protestations to the contrary notwithstanding, Bourdieu’s much-trumpeted overcoming of the dilemma: subjectivism vs. objectivism that precisely the just mentioned concept purportedly permits, is illusory. Bourdieu, who as most French Marxists, neo-Marxists and post-Marxists, whatever it would mean, is largely incapable of dialectical thinking, which demonstrates his dependence on the Althusserian formalism, style of thought that has exerted a huge influence on now already generations of especially French thinkers. Be that as it may, the Bourdieu statement reproduced below is a blatant example of determinism, thinking along the lines of ‘iron laws’.

‘The passions of the dominated habitus, a somatized social relationship, the law of the social body converted into the law of the body, are not of a kind that can be suspended by a simple effort of will, founded on a liberatory awakening of consciousness’ (2000, 179-80).

Similarly, dialectics is conspicuous by its absence in the following over-deterministic definition: ‘habitus is necessity internalized and converted into a disposition that generates meaningful practices and meaning-giving perceptions’(www.newlearningonline).

A critic points out that ‘in Bourdieu’s accounts of bodily hexis, the body appears as a sort of physiological template that is written by culture and that reciprocally reproduces culture. […] Bourdieu presents us with a sophisticated, yet deterministic, cycle of causation that runs from culture to the body, and back to culture’ (Fries 2005). This results in culturalism as a form of idealism, a paradoxical bedfellow of crude materialism discussed in another context: ‘Capital gains value, or legitimacy, only if deemed acceptable by authorized social groups within a field’ (Swartz 1997). This contention smacks of legal or quasi-juridical idealism, and bears little relationship with the real social world replete with informal and illegal relations, not to mention the fact that e.g. surplus value or profit belong to a quite other realm than legitimacy- a component of social consciousness.

Now the Bourdelian determinism mentioned above means his approach is also mechanistic, and certainly anti-dialectical. Focusing on reproduction (which is merely one type of change), he is not able to capture any countering tendencies and countervailing forces. The result is predictable:

Findings of poor achievement are not dominant in international research literature on the educational achievement of immigrant youth. Sometimes immigrant youth from certain backgrounds lag behind others in school, but they typically do better than might be expected when account is taken of their parents’ social class circumstances and level of schooling.
The theme of 'trying hard' is common to the ethnographic studies on immigrants to the United States. [...] Many of these studies fit Ogbu's distinction between immigrant minorities and 'involuntary' minorities. Youth from the former background do better in school. Quantitative survey research in the United States has corroborated the theme of immigrants trying harder and having high educational ambitions. In the UK, similarly, [...] minority pupils show greater persistence and motivation than non-immigrants. An earlier Norwegian youth study found that, compared with ethnic Norwegians, immigrant youth of non-Western background did more homework and had more positive attitudes to school. Concerning educational performance and attainment, the consistency of positive results is less internationally complete. Before controlling for social class, this suggests a key role of class position as a determinant of academic attainment. [...] and/or parental education, some immigrant groups match the native majority but others lag behind. In those studies that control for socio-cultural class conditions, the findings present a more optimistic view. In the case of American research, the focus has been on the predominantly Asian and Latin American nationalities in the new wave of immigration since the early 1980s. Most of the immigrant groupings examined outperform their peers. Immigrant youth also seem to perform better than non-immigrant peers from the same ethnic background.

The aforementioned scholar reports that:

European results are somewhat more mixed. British studies show that whilst Asians perform well after social class controls, youth of West Indian background do not perform as well as the majority white population. The few nationwide surveys which have been carried out elsewhere in Europe seem to show that performance differences from the majority grouping in secondary school achievement disappear, however, once social class is controlled for. (LAUGIQ 2000), which demonstrates again the preponderant impact of class. Such results have been found in France and Norway. In Sweden, in a study of whole cohorts of people born in Sweden during 1953-70, Simila (1994) found that those of immigrant background obtained higher rates of upper academic-secondary schooling than those of non-immigrant parentage, after controlling for parental socioeconomic status.

The researcher being quoted thus summarises the evidence reviewed:

A weakness of social reproduction theory is that it fails to explain such social fluidity and social advancement as occurs in a society. In particular, it offers little help in explaining educational success among individuals who lack the very class-related background resources which are deemed to be of decisive importance. Other social conditions [...] also structure social action. In addition to the individual exceptions, it is also possible to trace particularly strong social ascent over generations by certain cultural groups. Social history is replete with examples concerning certain religious minorities as well as certain immigrant groups who in the space of two to three generations have risen from humble beginnings to a preponderance in middle-class professions; for example, Japanese Americans, Chinese Americans, immigrant Jews who started in the sweatshops of New York's garment district or in London's Spitalfields. Social reproduction is a reality, but so also are the forces that defy it.

. (LAUGIQ 2000)

To be sure, there is no logical reason for which cultural capital scholars should be prevented from accommodating social, including class mobility. Thus, Dunlap (1986) argues that 'every class has its own cultural capital', concluding that 'to move from one class to another, people must gain new cultural capital'. Given the poor quality of class theory pertaining to the capital cultural literature and the spurious character of its central construct, the argument cited above is TAUTOLOGICAL AND CIRCULAR. Secondly, class mobility is driven by shifts in one's economic ownership, (i.e., one's own labour power not cultural capital situation. Even granted, for the sake of argument (which is too crude an assumption) that every class is characterised by an unique bundle of behaviours linked to cultural capital, a nouveau-riche is not required to acquire habits and speech patterns of the bourgeois class to be its effective member, this being based on his or her ownership position.

This may suggest that as regards the Bourdelian thesis, the bone of contention is not the fact of social reproduction as such but its mechanism. And there the Bourdelian conception is at its weakest. 'The Bourdieuan argument critically depends on the assumption that teachers value elite culture.' (Kingston 2001)

Broderick and Hubbard (2000) examined this assumption, by investigating to what extent, if any, students' cultural capital is taken account of by teachers, thereby determining grades:

None of the cultural capital variables that included 'household educational resources' was found to be significantly related to teachers' perceptions—and the addition of these variables to the model only slightly reduced the association between socioeconomic status (SES) and teachers' perceptions, which suggests that the alleged impact of cultural capital is spurious.

Not only are teachers generally unimpressed by what researchers have regarded as cultural capital, but the cultural capital variables had virtually no impact on the relationship between teachers' perceptions and students' grades and the former also accounted for only a small fraction of the substantial relationship between SES and grades.
This is not an isolated view: another study also concludes that ‘the association between parents’ participation in high culture and children’s educational attainment proves to be spurious. […]’The social background variable predicts both the lifestyle and the educational attainment of the family. This has very serious negative implications for Bourdieu’s theory’ (de Graaf 1986).

It may be surmised that those implications would have been somewhat mitigated had Bourdieu adopted a more robust conceptualisation of this ‘social background’. This is also pointed out by McNeal (1999) in whose opinion sociologists of education encounter problems in applying the Bourdelian notion of cultural capital because of their lack of ‘assessing the extent to which parent involvement differentially affects academic achievement by social class’.

With that, the argument comes full circle, as the Bourdelian and post-Bourdelian sociology of education hinges on the notion of social differentiation.

This implies that to criticise Bourdieu’s specific approach to social roots of educational inequalities is not to deny the need for this kind of research. To demonstrate this, it is useful to review again the main points that have emerged in the debate among educational sociologists.

Perhaps the most prominent issue surrounding cultural capital research is the empirical measurement of the concept. In one camp, researchers adhere closely to the measurement of cultural capital as outlined by Bourdieu, who used such items as one’s taste in and knowledge of music and art to measure cultural capital. They, like Eitle and (Eitle 2002) and many others follow in his footsteps, using similar measures, such as trips to museums, classical music concerts, and music and art classes. The other camp consists of those who argue that participation and interest in high-status art is irrelevant to school success, at least in the American context, which, if true, would not as much invalidate the theory outright as contextualise it—thereby exposing its ahistoricity. Farkas (1996) argues, for instance, that what counts in the context in question is not necessarily involvement in high-status culture, but certain ‘skills, habits, and styles,’ such as classroom deportment, that are valued by schools and teachers. In this view, cultural capital refers less to one’s knowledge of and interest in high-status culture than one’s tool kit of practical skills that can be put to use in school.

‘The Scream’ by Edward Munch, or Charles Bukowski’s poetry, however, have little in common with manuals of good manners.

Concomitantly, Kingston (2001) criticises the recent trend toward expanding the reach of cultural capital to include such things as household educational resources (e.g., books and computers) as inconsistent with a crucial aspect of the definition of cultural capital—that cultural capital is a high-status cultural signal used for the purposes of exclusion. Even more to the point, Kingston (2001: 96–7) writes that ‘such home practices represent the impact of “culture,” even what may be called middle-class culture. But they do not represent exclusionary practices that are valued for their connection to a social group’. He argues that in the ‘highly pluralized and democratized’ context of American culture, few ‘class-based exclusionary cultural practices’ still exist (Kingston 2001:91).

Having thus undermined cultural capital theory on two key counts, this particular critic is joined by others.

It is argued that cultural divisions along social class lines have dissolved in the United States, which should lead to a diminished role of high-status cultural capital in perpetuating social class inequality in education.

Whilst participation in high-status cultural activities is on the decline in the United States, Peterson and Kern (1996) found that individuals who are most interested in high-status culture have become more culturally omnivorous, expressing a wide variety of cultural interests, suggesting that elite rejection of popular culture has declined. Of course, referring back to our previous comment, it would constitute a crude sociologism to infer on this basis alone that there is no distinction between classical music and rock’n’roll. More broadly however, the fact is, the most relevant line of division is between good and bad music, good and bad literature. It is difficult to deny that Chandler or Christie’s detective stories are masterpieces in their own right, although the genre they represent is not regarded as highly as philosophical novels by Dostoevsky, in which criminal plot is otherwise often prominent.

In lieu of conclusion: Cultural capital as an oxymoron

Although the question of applicability of the capital term outside of the confines of the economy has been already touched on above, it is worthwhile to consider it at more length. No reader of the social science and humanities literature of recent years cannot have failed notice the phenomenon that fully deserves the title of ‘capital craze’. Even fields of inquiry that, as cultural studies, have normally little to do with economics, have fallen prey to this new fad, as, amongst many others, the present paper may testify.

Interestingly enough, this ‘capitalisation of social life has more intransigent opponents in the ranks of economists themselves than amongst the victims of the said imperialist policy. To illustrate the extent of irritation felt by the former, Baron and Hannan (1994: 1124) describe as puzzling efforts by sociologists ‘to extend the notion of capital’, complaining that they are ‘baffled that sociologists have begun referring to virtually every social feature as a form of capital’.

The following criticism levied against social capital on the grounds that its ‘similarity to the concept of capital is in style but not the substance’ (Woolcock 2000) applies equally to its cultural counterpart.

Finally, regarding specifically the latter, the mismatch between its adjective and noun parts is striking. Capital is inextricably tied to such ideas as homo economicus, or the rational, self-interested agent, profit maximisation as the prime, if not sole, goal of human action. Meanwhile, the word ‘culture evokes vastly different associations, such as emotion, feeling, imagination, creativity, autotelic instead of instrumental behaviour, and so on. Most importantly, whilst capital is by definition
ascribed to the private sector, culture is a classic public good. Relatedly, capital is inseparable from exploitation and domination. Meanwhile, according to Bourdieu himself, the field of culture is distinguished by the rejection of money and economic success as an indicator of quality and position. The field of cultural production replaced them with their own specific criteria which can be described as recognition from their peers, i.e. those involved in the issues of the field, such as artistic and intellectual work; imposition of these specific criteria on the whole of society and depriving the field of power or market mechanisms of the right to any meaningful assessment of works of art; rejection of profitability and other concepts from the register of the field of power and replacing them with specific values of the field of cultural production, and the creation of alternative social norms inherent to that specific field, such as greater freedom of culture and condemnation of all forms of discrimination (Bourdieu 1993).

Thus, whilst our failed attempts to compare economic and cultural capital might imply that the latter is something of an obscure metaphor, the present brief analysis suggests that –as the terms ‘cultural’ and ‘capital’ are incompatible -THE entire TERM IS AN OXYMORON.

An oxymoron, AFTER ALL, is a juxtaposition of contradictory terms, whose most common form involves precisely an adjective –noun combination of two words

Small wonder that such strange bedfellows make a poor descriptive and analytical, let alone explanatory concept, as have been shown above-notably in relation to the central thesis of cultural capital theory regarding social reproduction that is beset with theoretical and empirical problems. This and a wide range of other flaws pinpointed in the cultural capital framework justify the final conclusion that it should be discarded out of hand.

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ENDNOTES

1 As shown also by the following definition: “Objectified cultural capital refers to what is considered high art, and tends to be found in museums, concert halls, and the homes of the upper classes” (Dumais 2005).

ii Which is almost literally reproduced by the explanation that “Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital refers to the cultural patterns passed on from generation to generation and includes ways of acting, speaking, dressing, eating, etc (McLaren 1994).

iii This enumeration highlights the point, made by some critics, of bias manifested by the the theory of cultural capital that arbitrarily limits the concept of culture to its high-brow variety, as if mass, or pop culture were not culture at all. Such a rigid division is difficult to maintain given, for instance, the degree of sophistication pertaining to many electronic rock compositions not below that of the likes of Messiaen and Schonberg.