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## Epilogue: Bourdieu's legacy?

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## **EPILOGUE: BOURDIEU'S LEGACY ?**

**Elizabeth Silva and Alan Warde**

A dozen chapters, no matter how insightful, can make only a limited contribution to a thorough assessment of Bourdieu's legacy. The varied concerns and contrasting evaluations indicate the complexity of the subject matter, and its capacity to arouse disagreement. But arguably controversy is productive and the best way to establish a platform from which to go forward to exploit the inheritance of the currently most influential sociologist of the last quarter of the twentieth century. Perhaps also it is explicable.

As Frédéric Lebaron insists, Bourdieu's work, as well as being vast, is multi-dimensional. Although one man's multidimensionality may be another woman's ambivalence, people are able to take many different elements from his work and fashion them into novel configurations and generate new research questions. Certainly, multi-dimensionality produces openness to different lines of interpretation and hence disputation. More than most other major contributors to sociological theory, his work lends itself to partial appropriation and empirical application. These are features which make Bourdieu constantly useful in the present, at a time when, only a few years after his death, the overall value of a multitude of works with a complex architecture is still neither fully known nor appreciated beyond the circles of his closest collaborators and most vituperative critics.

This book, we hope, not only represents the range of opinion concerning Bourdieu's current standing, but will be a complementary to others attempting to evaluate the full significance of his work. In this case, we have surveyed the options it makes available for the sociology of culture. Out of the disagreements we might yet distil some worthwhile lessons. It now looks as if the interpretations of Bourdieu which have been specific to national sociological traditions, to which Lebaron refers, are becoming less of an obstacle. Although translation of his works is no guarantee of this, the growth of his reputation in the USA over the last decade will ensure that they will get increasingly wide international exposure. Disagreements and counter-evaluations will become less dependent on national traditions.

The American reception of Bourdieu has tended to focus on the application of his key concepts, among them habitus, cultural capital, field, legitimate culture, disinterestedness, practice. His work has thereby provided a significant foil for clarification, modification and re-conceptualisation across many sub-areas of sociology. The close examination of the concept of habitus is one example. There have been attempts to partially rehabilitate or refine it (e.g. Crossley, 2001; Lizardo, 2004; Reay and Sayer, both this volume); and others have sought to specify it more closely for critical purposes (eg Archer, 2007; Crossley, 2001; Lahire 2003) and have added significantly to the understanding of recurrent social action. Another example is the uniquely Bourdieusian concept of cultural capital which has likewise inspired detailed conceptual clarification and diverse application (eg Bennett *et al.*, 2009; Lamont and Lareau, 1988; Lareau and Weininger, 2003; Lizardo, 2008). Perhaps most encouraging is the fact that not only are his key concepts being refined but that they find wide application in substantive sociological analysis. This is no doubt the

reason why Bourdieu has become so much cited in American journals in recent years (Sallaz and Zavisca, 2007). Of course, raids to capture discrete concepts may violate the integrity of the conceptual schema which some detect as core to his work. To a purist such forays may smack of indiscipline, but in practice it provides a focus for cumulative empirical research on topics of cultural practice in the context of power.

As Fiona Devine observed, Bourdieu was a master of the art of combining theory with empirical research. Bourdieu was particularly effective because his work has sufficient of a theoretical core to hold the oeuvre together – there are concepts that are recognisable, which can be redeployed in different contexts, and a framework of concepts which provide a platform for coherent concrete analyses – but without ever subsiding into pure theory. For those who either loyally subscribe to the Bourdieusian corpus or who are simply satisfied with the intimations of the overall meta- and middle-range theoretical assumptions, his framework provides a point of departure from which to undertake empirical analysis without having to rework the fundamentals of the discipline. This is something not to be disregarded lightly; laying aside questions of theoretical axioms, basic assumptions and orientations towards data is often very necessary to the conduct of social research. *Pace* Michael Burawoy (2005a), sociologists have many important things to do in addition to sharpening their concepts and integrating them into a meta-theoretical framework. Nevertheless, for sociology, the key to becoming a cumulative social science requires scholars to be working with identifiable paradigms on sets of problems which are explored thoroughly. It probably requires scholars like Bourdieu, who both organise sociological research programmes *and* have to hand a malleable meta- and middle-

range theoretical framework, to establish a platform for cumulative knowledge building in social sciences.

Bourdieu also made a significant, if unsystematic, contribution to methodology. While we might not necessarily go so far as Lebaron in claiming this as his major contribution or legacy, but his flexible adaptation and inspired experimentation with a wide range of investigative techniques makes his appeal a wide one (Silva *et al.*, 2009; Warde, 2008a). To review Bourdieu's opus as a giant sociological toolkit would reveal enormously versatility. There perhaps is the rub, for one can do both good and bad things with his instruments; they allow both congenial and objectionable ways of approaching the analysis of the social world.

Bourdieu has also proved extremely valuable as a target for critique. This is partly because he held distinctive and challenging positions on key issues. He was, in retrospect very prescient regarding what was likely to become a significant sociological or political issue. Consistently combative in style, he always tried to separate his position from others in a debate, often by refusing either side of a polarised debate and claiming to break down obstructive dichotomies and create more sustainable syntheses. In some instances he was applauded for success, in other cases it left many readers with a sense of ambiguity, confusion and exasperation. As a prominent figure in the French intellectual field he personally inspired loyalty, admiration and affection from some, and disdain and hostility from others. Emotional reactions continue to be heated. However, one might expect the personal animosities to soon be forgotten. Hopefully, attempts to reconstruct his ambiguities and ambivalences into some form of consistent, and therefore necessarily oversimplified

coherent theoretical edifice – an activity which both his friends and foes seem to do in equal measure – will cease. Because his contribution does not depend massively upon a grand and abstract theoretical schema, it is more amenable to adaptation for new purposes.

We expect that social change and new evidence will require modification of his concepts and methods, though this is nothing that he would not readily acknowledge. Topics which he ignored will inevitably increase with the passage of time. Of course as Grenfell (this volume) pointed out, it is perverse to criticise a social scientist for not having answered every possible interesting question, past or present. Nevertheless, some types of analysis and some sorts of questions may be uncongenial to particular traditions of thought – they are not considered to be relevant questions, or they are thought to be improperly formulated, or they are impossible to ask within a particular theoretical frame. In this regard, some have been unconvinced that Bourdieu gives any worthwhile purchase on newly emergent processes in contemporary social life and demand alternatives. Among key areas where new and necessary concepts have emerged include the heterogeneity of multiple cultural hierarchies that challenge the primacy of class, such as gender, age and ethnicity (see Bennett et al. 2009), international mobilities and the impact of multiculturalism (Hage 1998) and the effects of changing commitments of personal relationships on the relationality of the social (where the notion of ‘emotional capital’ is a related concern, cf. Reay 2000, Silva 2000). Attempts to apply the established concepts in international comparative analysis have not always met with obvious success; the example of legitimate culture in the UK and the USA might be an example. The effects of environmental degradation on social life will be another relevant area of contemporary concern

requiring rigorous analysis for which there has been little preparation within a Bourdieusian perspective.

Contributions to this book show that the richness of Bourdieu's work has potential for grasping current social issues. We have little doubt that his orientation to sociology and his methods and concepts will be deployed extensively in the near to mid-term future. Indeed, since he has only recently become widely appreciated among sociologists outside France, there should be much further mileage in the technical and theoretical apparatus. A loose theoretical framework which contains concepts and procedures so readily applicable in empirical analysis and explanation is likely to have continued impact. Of course, reformulation and enlargement will be required to account for the new dynamics of contemporary life. Bourdieu (1999b: 225) noted that as academics we are deeply marked by the contexts in which we find ourselves. Our misunderstandings are sometimes resources for social position in a highly competitive field. Perhaps as the force of his personality and its influence on relationships with other schools of thought diminishes, and personal loyalties and animosities subside, potential that so many of our contributors see in various aspects of his work will be released and realized. This may well result in many aspects of his account being revised and superseded, but given his conviction that the theoretical and the empirical should be intricately associated this should have caused him neither surprise nor distress.