

FURTHER NOTES ON BOURDIEU'S "MARXISM"*

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ABSTRACT

Against the invocation of "Marxism" as a neo-MacCarthyite tactic of intellectual disqualification (recently exemplified by Jeffrey Alexander's indictment of Bourdieu's work on just such basis), this article briefly examines the relationships between Bourdieu and Marx to suggest that Bourdieu's thought is a *mixtum compositum* produced by a synthesis of diverse philosophical and theoretical currents. His alleged "Marxism" is found to be rather unorthodox since it allies him in turn with Weber and with Durkheim: Bourdieu shares with Marx but also with Durkheim the rejection of pure theory and a relational conception of the social, while Marx and Bourdieu both part with Durkheim and draw closer to Weber in adopting an agonistic view of social life. To know whether Bourdieu is "Marxist" or not is the archetype of the scholastic question which obfuscates the common base on which all critical sociologies, Marxist or not, rest.

I would like to return briefly to the subterranean relationships, real or alleged, between the sociology of Pierre Bourdieu and the thought of Karl Marx. The venomous attack of American sociologist Jeffrey Alexander—the prophet sans disciple of the stillborn theoretical movement that is (or was) 'neo-functionalism'—provides us with an opportune point of entry into the matter.

Not that this long and ponderous pamphlet—whose title, 'The Reality of Reduction: The Failed Synthesis of Pierre Bourdieu,' seems to hesitate, like the character portrayed by its author, between tragedy and farce—calls for a substantive response: the rhetoric of resentment which animates it, and its astounding ignorance of the internal logic and intellectual context within which Bourdieu's *oeuvre* developed, suffice to dash its iconoclastic pretensions.¹ But because it reveals the extraordinary endurance of the invocation of 'Marxism' as a *tactic of academic disqualification*, which still distorts, whether one wants it or not, every discussion of the relations an author has with the inventor of historical materialism.

Resentful for not having been welcomed at the masters' table after he had invited himself there on his own authority more than a decade earlier, left short of ideas and short of breath from administering in vain wearisome theoretical mouth-to-mouth resuscitation to dying Parsonism,² Alexander resorts to the oldest

technique of intellectual combat there is to attract to himself the renown that his work had thus far been unable to earn him: political-intellectual anathema, in its neo-McCarthyist variant, leveled against other most cited, if not the most celebrated, sociologist of the moment.

'Bourdieu's sociology,' the Los Angeles theoretician announces with much to-do, 'is irredeemably flawed, in theoretical as well as in empirical terms, and ultimately in ideological and moral terms as well. It distorts the nature of action and order and misunderstands the basic institutional and cultural structures, let alone the moral and human possibilities, of contemporary life' (Alexander 1995: 130). A revelation that makes one shudder: this bitter failure, so total that one wonders what, indeed, the reason could be for the influence this sociology enjoys throughout the world, in the most varied disciplines and well beyond the academic microcosm, is supposed to result from Bourdieu's 'hidden' Marxism. (It is also by denouncing their Marxist premises that Alexander condemned the British practitioners of "cultural studies"—inspired by the Birmingham School, Raymond Williams and E. P. Thompson, but also by Gramsci, Foucault, and Bourdieu—to whom he purports to oppose his own wholesome, American, 'pluralist' version of this new interdisciplinary genre [Sherwood, Smith, and Alexander 1993]).³ This dreary old song takes us back to the mediocre debates in France in the early seventies, which Alexander keeps harping on without even knowing it, since, with the exception of a meager handful of articles duly selected for their negative tonality, he has chosen to overlook the wide-ranging discussions aroused by Bourdieu's work in Europe and the Americas. This work, on thinking it over, would be nothing more more (or less) than 'the most impressive living embodiment of a neo-Marxist tradition that, triumphant only a decade ago [?], currently is struggling to survive.' This is where the root of its crippling deficiencies is supposed to lie, especially the fact that it renders us utterly unable to 'understand, much less appreciate, the pluralist and democratic dimensions of contemporary societies' (Alexander 1995: 128, 131).

The merit of Alexander's dissertation, if we have to find one for it, is that it vividly demonstrates the inanity of the accusation it makes. To know whether Bourdieu is 'Marxist' or not is the archetype of the scholastic question, subjected to the *logic of the trial* and not to the imperative of interpretive charity that governs every intellectual exchange worthy of the name. The answer, whether positive or negative, teaches us more about the thought of the person who levies it, provided he has a thought, than about the oeuvre in question—one should say, in this case, subjected to inquisition.⁴

Every complex body of thought is a *mixtum compositum* produced by a synthesis of diverse currents that generates original theoretical insights, empirical discoveries, and new conceptual tools. Engels was fond of recalling that Marx's sociology was forged of an odd alloy of German idealist philosophy, French socialism, and British political economy. Kant, Fichte, and Hegel; Babeuf, Fourier, and Saint Simon; Adam Smith, Ricardo, and John Stuart Mill—such are the intellectual sources at which Marx drew to erect his system. As for Bourdieu's

theory, it was born at the confluence of a flowering of philosophical and sociohistorical traditions that intellectual and academic logic tended (and still tends, for some of them) to hold separate, when it does not set them up as enemies: Marx and Mauss, Durkheim and Weber, Cassirer and Wittgenstein, Husserl and Lévi-Strauss, Merleau-Ponty and Austin, Bachelard and Panofsky.

Just as one could not reduce Marxian thought to an Hegelianism or a mere variant of classical political economy,⁵ it is terribly reductionist to want to boil the moving figure that Bourdieu's sociology sketches down to one or the other of its theoretical coordinates, whether it be Marx, Weber, or even Durkheim—this last case being, on the whole, arguably the more plausible (Wacquant 1995).⁶ All the more so since intellectual historiography and the retrospective turn on the formative years of the structuralist and poststructuralist 'generation' (e.g. Bourdieu and Passeron 1967, Descombes 1986, Bourdieu 1991, Eribon 1989) suggest that, at that moment, Marx occupied a paradoxical position in the pantheon of authors: central on the sociopolitical plane but decidedly marginal from the specifically theoretical viewpoint.

Moreover, the rapprochement with Marx, whether claimed or imposed, appreciative or incriminating, serves too often to underline a difference, a deviation from the collective heritage and path of the social sciences. This leads one to obfuscate the depth and breadth of the common base on which all critical sociologies, Marxist or not, rest. The following three points, on which Marx and Bourdieu, but also Durkheim and Weber, are in agreement, testify to this.

The first relates to the *rejection of pure theory* as a discourse closed in upon itself, detached from any empirical referent, and which proceeds from a contemplative posture that puts the sociologist in a state of weightlessness in regard to the social world. For Bourdieu, as for Marx and Durkheim before him, and contrary to Parsons, theoretical activity is not separable from the scientific work of construction of a concrete object. To forget this is to fall back into the 'ideological method' once championed by the Young Hegelians, and of which Alexandrian 'theorizing' is one of the contemporary avatars.

Rejecting such a 'verbal masquerade,' Marx (1970: 110, 46) maintains that 'empirical observation must, in each particular case, show empirically, and without any mystification or speculation' the dynamic interpenetration of 'ideas, conceptions, and consciousness with the material intercourse of men'. It is only the 'true philosophers' at whom Marx scoffs in his *Poverty of Philosophy* for 'seeing things upside down' and (mis)taking the categories of speculative reflection for socio-historical realities. Durkheim (1975: 45) says just this when he demands that 'the sociologist, instead of reveling in metaphysical meditations about social things, take well-circumscribed groups of facts as the objects of his researches.' And it is clear that, no more than Marx, Bourdieu has no taste for the mysterious charms of 'theoretical logic in sociology':

Scientific works, in distinction to theoretical texts, call not for contemplation or dissertation but for practical confrontation with experience. To

understand them truly is to cause the mode of thought that is expressed in them to operate in relation to a different object, to reactivate it in a new act of production, as inventive and original as the original act itself, and it is in every respect opposite to the derealizing commentary of the lector, an impotent and sterilizing metadiscourse (Bourdieu 1992: 254).

Second point: Bourdieu shares with Marx, but also with Durkheim, a *relational conception of the social* which necessitates that one reconstruct the complete network of relations underlying each fact, and which implies that one explains social life 'not by the conception that those who participate in it form of it for themselves, but by profound causes that escape from consciousness' (Durkheim 1970: 250).

The author of *Das Kapital* places at the center of his sociological thought not the abstract idea of the 'individual' dear to social contract theory and to the liberal sociology that is today returning to fashion, but the ideas of social relation and social totality: 'The essence of man is not an abstraction inherent in each particular individual. The real nature of man is the totality of social relations' (Marx 1956: 68). What is true of the social agent is no less true of capital, concerning which Marx never tired of repeating that it 'is not a thing' but 'a determinate relation falling within the scope of a historically determined social formation' (Marx 1956: 156).

Likewise, Bourdieu's conceptual arsenal gives pride of place to relational concepts. Habitus, field, cultural capital, doxa, symbolic violence: these are so many notions that provide a stenographic designation for the 'bundles' of relations inscribed now in 'first-order objectivity' in the form of distributions of material resources, now in the 'second-order objectivity,' imprinted in the body by means of categories of perception, now in the relation that obtains between these two orders of reality (Bourdieu 1996). Marx, Durkheim, and Bourdieu are thus close to each other in the project of a *total* socio-historical science capable of embracing the whole of human phenomena, including those that appear the most refractory to social analysis, such as consciousness, suicide, and taste.

Finally, and this is our third point, Marx and Bourdieu both differentiate themselves from Durkheim and draw closer to Max Weber in that their conception of the social world is fundamentally *agonistic*.⁷ In their eyes, social configurations are, in every time and every place, the product of struggles—class struggles through history in the case of the co-drafter of the *Communist Manifesto*, a struggle over classifications that encompasses but overruns the sole register of classes, in the case of the author of *Distinction*. It is so as better to emphasize this conflictual and dynamic dimension of social forms that Bourdieu replaced—or, rather, specified—the notion of 'structure' with that of *field* (Bourdieu 1992: 254–257). One knows that every field, as a space of social positions and strategies endowed with its own logic, presents two fundamental properties. It is, on the one hand, a system of forces that weigh on all those who are engaged in it, whether they perceive these forces or not, and whatever the location they occupy within it, central

or marginal. But, on the other hand, a field is a terrain of struggles aimed at modifying or conserving the state of the relations of forces ranged against each other and the distribution of the specific capital upon which it is based.

Every social universe is thus the site of competition without end and without limits, a competition by and in which are determined the differences that provide both the mainspring and the stakes of social existence. Bourdieu here throws up a bridge between Marx and Weber, for whom 'without exception every sphere of social action is profoundly influenced by structures of dominance' (Weber 1978: 941) and whose materialist sociology of religion is one of the indirect sources of the (re)formulation of the concept of field. This is to say that Bourdieu's 'Marxism' is indeed none too orthodox, since it is shared in one part by Émile Durkheim and in another by Max Weber.

NOTES

* This article was originally written and published as an afterword to the French translation of an older article in English comparing Bourdieu and Marx in a special issue of *Actuel Marx* devoted to Pierre Bourdieu ('Notes tardives sur le 'marxisme' de Bourdieu,' *Actuel Marx*, 20, October 1996, pp. 83–90). It is translated from the French by Tarik Wareh.

1. From the germinating profusion of misinterpretations, errors, omissions, snubs, and caricatures that weave the fabric of this essay, one shall point only these few pearls: that Bourdieu had a 'Sartrean phase' before converting to 'quasi-Althusserian Marxism' from 1963 to 1972; that his project 'is, in fact, to negate the notion of reflexivity', and its author devoted 'to demonstrating the very impossibility of critical thought'; that he therefore 'rejects the idea of a theory-laden, postpositivist science' as much as he 'devalues and degrades the achievements of those who succeed in gaining mobility' (which would imply a high degree of self-deprecation), 'mocks the efforts of social reformers', and would see 'the elimination of intellectual responsibility' (Alexander 1995: 197, 191, [?], 192, 172).

One has to be astonished that the French colleagues who hosted Alexander in Paris and Bordeaux for the sabbatical year during which this text was written did not rescue their American guest from such blunders and nonsense. Skimming through just one of Bourdieu's books, *La Misère du monde* (*The Weight of the World*), for example (which had just come out when Alexander began his stay in France, and which he lists in his bibliography, apparently without having bothered to open it), suffices to gauge how ridiculous these appraisals are.

2. The publication of his doctoral thesis, a scholastic rereading of Marx, Durkheim, Weber, and Parsons preceded by an essay on the philosophy of the social sciences, in four volumes audaciously entitled *Theoretical Logic in Sociology* (Alexander 1982–83) and aiming to (re)establish the supremacy of the 'multidimensional theory' inaugurated by Parsons and

continued by himself, earned Alexander the half-affectionate, half-mocking nickname of 'Parsons Junior' among some of his American colleagues. He has since reconverted, apparently with no more success, as a (self-proclaimed) leader of American-style 'cultural studies' (Alexander and Smith 1993).

3. The most pitiful aspect of this affair, however, is that Alexander's essay, which had been repeatedly rejected by the leading American scientific journals for reasons that are all too obvious for anyone who takes the trouble to read it, ended up being published in book form by Verso, the publishing house associated with the *New Left Review*. One might regret that, after having been the showcase for structuralist Marxists long after their discomfiture on the Continent, it has made itself the mouthpiece of American cultural 'liberalism' laced with crude anti-Marxism.
4. The straightforward tone affected by Alexander in his prosecution does not preclude recourse to malicious Parisian gossip, which allows him, as intrepid explorer of the mysterious planet of the French intelligentsia, to reveal to the Anglo-American reader this supposed open secret: 'Leading [French] theorists and researchers will suggest, in private, that Bourdieu is "the last Marxist in France," that his ideas are increasingly irrelevant.' Yet 'these opinions are very rarely exposed in print', as if a climate of (Stalinist?) terror reigned over the French intellectual field (Alexander 1995: 202–203, emphasis mine).
5. Lasalle's famous formula according to which Marx is 'a Hegel turned economist, a Ricardo turned socialist' expresses well this impossibility.
6. More recently, the quest for Pierre Bourdieu's theoretical antecedents has more readily turned to Anglo-Saxon philosophy. Thus Mitchell Aboulafla (1999) picks out the multiple affinities that link Bourdieu to the founders of pragmatism, while Earle (1999) argues that 'Bourdieu's "theory of practice" is that which Wittgenstein would have developed had he not, in an arbitrary and aristocratic manner, scorned all theory in philosophy.' The Wittgensteinian turn of Bourdieu's thought is likewise emphasized by Taylor (1992), Chauviré (1995), and Bouveresse (1995).
7. Paul Raymond Harrison (1993) has proposed to read Bourdieu's sociological theory as an 'agonology'.

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