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Saggi

Comment on John Goldthorpe/3

by Mike Savage, Alan Warde *and* Fiona Devine

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We are grateful to John Goldthorpe for engaging with our paper in his critical review of the concept of cultural capital [Savage, Warde and Devine 2005]. He suggests that the putative “capital, assets, resources” approach to social stratification that we proposed is undermined by its association with and advocacy of Bourdieu’s “wild” moments. However, in our defence, it is important to note that our paper was not intended to be a slavish or uncritical espousal of Bourdieu’s stratification theory. We agree with aspects of Goldthorpe’s critique of Bourdieu, and especially its espousal of an overly tight functionalist theory of social reproduction. We agree that the extent of absolute and relative social mobility in Britain and France over the last sixty years is such that, at the least, his concept of cultural capital needs to be substantially reworked.

For all this, Bourdieu’s work remains an important, indeed a vital, springboard. There is something perverse in Goldthorpe’s excavation of largely forgotten sociologists of the early 1960s. Like it or not, there is no gainsaying that Bourdieu’s concept of cultural capital has inspired crucially important research in the sociology of education, stratification and culture since the 1960s. Unusually, interest in his work is found in the very different traditions of sociology in America and Europe, and, unlike the kind of untestable sociology that Goldthorpe [2000] rightly criticises, much of this later work has engaged empirically with his arguments about cultural capital resulting in refinements, improvements and further research questions, for instance

in claims about the increasing significance of the “cultural omnivore”¹ that have also interested Goldthorpe himself in his recent work [e.g. Chan and Goldthorpe 2007]. It is in this spirit of creative engagement and critique with Bourdieu’s rich body of work that we think most progress is to be made.

We found Bourdieu a valuable starting point because, we argued, orthodox class analysis – notably that associated with Erik Wright’s important work – rests on a theory of exploitation which is difficult to operationalise. Goldthorpe’s own alternative approach, indebted to rational action theory, deploys an account of resources which are tautologically defined in terms of whatever factors appear to be associated with advantage. It was in the context of these problems that we had recourse to Bourdieu’s concepts.

We think it is helpful to appreciate the separation and yet also interdependence of economic, cultural and social capitals, and we think that the type of relational analysis that Bourdieu’s field theory advocates helps achieve that. Field theory allows sociologists to retain a concept of relationality (understood in terms of positions and position taking within a field), which avoids zero sum or purely quantitative indicators of advantage and disadvantage. It offers a way of recognising the multivalent aspects of resources, and of exploring how accumulation and conversion processes operate. This leads to the important idea that class itself might be seen as an emergent effect of the distribution of resources across fields and over time. If there is something wild about Bourdieu’s account of the role of culture in social reproduction, then our purpose was to cultivate, rather than to either endorse or tame it. What stratification analysis needs is refinement of complex explanatory concepts. Cultural capital is a prime candidate for treatment.

Goldthorpe seems to us most unsatisfactory and unimaginative in his lack of appreciation of the *complexity* of the concept of cultural capital. The attraction of the CARs approach is precisely in drawing attention to how we might operationalise slippery concepts like cultural capital. The appeal of the concept as employed by Bourdieu was its reference not simply to a resource facilitating educational attainment, but also to a broader anthropological sense as a composite “way of life.” His distinction between embodied, objectified and institutionalised forms of cultural capital [Bourdieu 1996] suggests a wide, and subtle, ambit for the concept. Indeed, in *Distinction* [Bourdieu 1984] he was much more interested in the role that cultural capital played in the organisation of cultural practices (covering music, literature, the visual arts, furnishings, and lifestyle) than in its specific significance for generating

¹ Thus the idea of the cultural omnivore was developed by Richard Peterson [e.g. Peterson and Simkus 1992] as a critical reflection on Bourdieu’s work.

inequalities in educational attainment. It was only through this complex account of the organisation of the cultural field itself that he was able to explore the formation of classes, as well as the role of inherited legitimate culture in the reproduction of privilege through the schooling process. We see cultural capital as a fertile concept in need of elaboration and development, especially through detailed studies of the complex organisation of cultural practices themselves. It would not, therefore, be helpful to follow Goldthorpe in an attempt to tie it down to a very tight and restricted notion relevant only to educational attainment at school.

If there were no other culturally-relevant processes or institutions involved in social reproduction besides family socialisation, schooling, and the attainment of qualifications then Goldthorpe might be justified in his refusal of our and Bourdieu's "wildness." We submit, to the contrary, that even if command of legitimate culture no longer made any perceptible difference to any child's relative educational success, cultural capital could not be dismissed when analysing class formation and the reproduction of privilege over time. In this regard Goldthorpe's own acknowledgement of the potential importance of "cultural resources" is interesting in view of the fact that Goldthorpe [1996] discounts the importance of cultural factors and emphasises the importance of economic processes in generating inequalities in educational attainment. It is not clear from his current paper whether he now recognises that cultural resources might actually be more important than he argues there, or whether it was understandable that cultural resources became the subject of research in the 1960s but that subsequent research (for instance his own) has now discredited this hypothesis [see the general discussion in Devine 2004].

Goldthorpe's paper is unclear about what is meant by cultural resources and what their role might be in the reproduction of advantage. Rejecting the idea that the concepts of cultural capital and cultural resources are "mere terminological preferences," he distinguishes between cultural values and cultural resources but, disappointingly, does not elaborate further. Yet the distinction begs further questions. Are cultural values a component of cultural resources, and are there other component parts to this concept of cultural resources? What are they? Perhaps cultural resources and cultural values are one and the same thing? Maybe Goldthorpe is proposing that cultural values are a more precise concept than *habitus* when addressing the topic of cultural advantage? In addition, it is puzzling how this discussion of cultural values relates back to his analysis of action and mobility strategies in earlier publications [e.g. Goldthorpe 2000; 2006].

We look forward to further elaborations of his theoretical position concerning cultural resources and the relationship of the economic, cultural and social realms.

We certainly believe that the role of cultural competencies and capacities in social reproduction remains a key issue for stratification research (whether of a mainstream sociological kind or otherwise). As for ourselves, our paper was explicitly programmatic, and we concede that it remains to be shown that such an approach can deliver theoretically coherent and empirically persuasive analysis of the structured reproduction of inequalities. We will be pleased to accept that challenge in forthcoming work, for instance that deriving from the *Cultural Capital and Social Exclusion* project [for early findings from which, see Bennett and Silva 2006, and especially Gayo-Cal, Savage and Warde 2006].² We would wager that the concept of cultural capital will prove useful in superseding the simple functionalist explanation of class reproduction that both Goldthorpe and we find unsatisfactory.

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² Savage and Warde are currently completing a monograph on this project: Tony Bennett, Mike Savage, Elizabeth Silva, Alan Warde, Modesto Gayo-Cal and Dave Wright, *Culture and Class after Distinction*, to be published by Routledge in 2008.

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“Cultural Capital”: Some Critical Observations

Abstract: “Cultural capital” is a key concept in the work of Pierre Bourdieu. It plays a central role in Bourdieu’s account of the generation of class inequalities in educational attainment, which has evident affinities with those advanced by other sociologists of education; but also in his far more ambitious – though empirically unsustainable – theory of social reproduction. Much confusion can then be shown to arise from a failure to distinguish between the uses of the concept in the two quite differing contexts of what might be labelled as Bourdieu “domesticated” and Bourdieu “wild”. Researchers using the concept in the former context often fail to appreciate its radical nature and, in turn, the full extent to which their findings undermine Bourdieu’s theory of social reproduction; while those who would wish to understand the concept in the latter context have difficulty in showing its continuing fitness for research purposes, given the failure of the larger theory in which it is embedded. Advantage would follow from leaving the language of “cultural capital” to those who still seek to rescue this theory, and otherwise replacing it with a more differentiated conceptual approach.

Keywords: assets, capitals, cultural capital, resources, stratification.

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