

Omar Lizardo

Comment on John Goldthorpe/5. Three Cheers for Unoriginality

(doi: 10.2383/26580)

Sociologica (ISSN 1971-8853)

Fascicolo 1, maggio-giugno 2008

Ente di afferenza:

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Comment on John Goldthorpe/5

Three Cheers for Unoriginality

by Omar Lizardo

doi: 10.2383/26580

In following comment on Goldthorpe's essay on Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital as it relates to his views on the sociology of education, I will set myself two goals: First, to ascertain the accuracy of Goldthorpe's various claims regarding Bourdieu's theory of the role of education in class reproduction (and only indirectly with the role of the concept of "cultural capital" in Bourdieu's various theoretical proposals). In the main I think that the bulk of Goldthorpe's exposition does not do a very good job of representing what Bourdieu's actual stands were in regards to the various issues that Goldthorpe raised. Second, I will attempt to take a stand in relation to the broader tone of Goldthorpe's essay, in particular when it comes to the issue of "soundness" versus "originality" and the way that we should go about constructing sociological theory by way of conceptual appropriation from other theorists.

It is important to mention a few words in relation to my overall interpretive strategy in what follows. First, in contrast to Goldthorpe, I will not draw on any of the secondary literature that has recently begun to accumulate regarding Bourdieu's "theories." The reason for this is that I consider this broad Anglo-American literature – some of which Goldthorpe cites approvingly [i.e. Jenkins 2002] – to be highly unreliable and subject to various errors in interpretation. Thus, I will only respond to Goldthorpe's claims as to what Bourdieu "said" by, well, quoting from English translations of what Bourdieu actually said. Second, in contrast to Goldthorpe, I will not draw on the early work on education co-authored with Jean Claude Passeron (i.e. *Reproduction* and *The Inheritors*). I understand that this work has created an indelible (but in my view misleading) impression as to what constituted Bourdieu's purported "theory of class reproduction" in the Anglo-American academy. Nonethe-

less, I feel that this early work provides only a partial window into Bourdieu's various stances on the relevant subject matter. But more importantly, this early work was referred by Bourdieu himself as having been shown to have erred "on the side of simplification" by his own subsequent research [Bourdieu 1984, 160]. In this respect, a fair – and charitable, although I understand that this last sentiment was not high on Goldthorpe's own list – assessment of Bourdieu's stances on the various matters of relevant to this discussion cannot be attained by focusing exclusively on these early works as Goldthorpe does. Instead, all of my quotations come from Bourdieu's last words on the subject of class and education in *Distinction* [*ibidem*] as well as *The State Nobility* [Bourdieu 1996]. I make only one exception to this self-imposed rule and that is when I rely on one early theoretical essay [Bourdieu 1967] that I think is key if we are to understand what Bourdieu's "overarching" theoretical framework on the role of education in modern societies is actually all about. But in all, I rely only on works that Bourdieu authored *by himself*. This is important, because what appears to be in question here is Bourdieu's view on habitus, education, etc. and not the Bourdieu-Passeron theory. I understand that by doing this, instead of drawing primarily from the short articles on education and "symbolic power" and Bourdieu-Passeron on *Reproduction* and *The Inheritors* that Goldthorpe relies on, puts him at a disadvantage, because my response presumes a much more thorough familiarity with Bourdieu's *entire* corpus of writing (especially the later work) – including the long, wordy and complicated books – than Goldthorpe seems to have the time or inclination to actually develop. However, I feel that this is fairest way to treat Bourdieu, given that Goldthorpe gives that treatment to himself by quoting from his latest work whenever he needs to establish what his positions are, and not his own earlier work which might contain positions that he has come to reject or modify. This is nothing to hold against anybody, since naturally all scholars develop and build complexity into their views over time.

Who's Afraid of Bourdieu's Theory of Class Reproduction?

According to Goldthorpe the concept of cultural capital is inherently tied by an unbreakable umbilical cord to some (ghostly, unspecified) "overarching" theory of class reproduction. This (wild, undomesticated) theory, Goldthorpe tell us, relies on implausible assumptions and mechanisms. These assumptions are so absolutely constraining, misguided and off-the-mark that they imply empirical patterns that can easily be shown to be falsified by the empirical record on educational mobility in contemporary Western societies. What are these claims and assumptions?

Claim 1: The habitus is a system of dispositions formed in the family environment that is impervious to any sort of change by educational institutions. According to Goldthorpe, Bourdieu's "theory of class reproduction" states that the habitus is a system of competences and dispositions that are formed early on in the family environment. After they are formed these dispositions are impervious to any change or transformation. This means that the dominant classes are able to impart a habitus that is consonant with the educational institutions and deterministically leads to success and the working class imparts a different type of habitus that is not concordant with the make-up of educational institutions and deterministically leads to failure. The key claim that Goldthorpe imputes to Bourdieu is that because the *habitus* is formed so early in life *it cannot be changed by the scholastic situation*:

The transmission of cultural capital, in its embodied expression, is a major part of the formation of the habitus. And, for Bourdieu, this would appear to be a generally more certain and predictable process than that of socialisation as conventionally understood and also one that is realised yet more exclusively within a family, and thus a social class, context. Typically, the habitus is formed in its essentials by what Bourdieu calls "domestic" influences, and is then further developed only through the individual's own subsequent experience of "class conditions." *It remains profoundly resistant to other influences. In particular – and of chief importance for present purposes – the school and other educational institutions are seen as having only very limited potential in this regard.* Bourdieu emphasises that the habitus acquired within their families by children of dominant classes is then underwritten, as it were, in the course of their education; but only in quite exceptional cases would he allow for the possibility of schools serving to radically redress or "make over" other forms of habitus that children may bring to them. That is to say, there is little place in Bourdieu's approach for mainstream sociology's concept of "re-socialisation," and certainly not as this might occur through the agency of the educational system [Goldthorpe 2007].

Schools according to this alleged "theory" are simply sorting systems, sending the sons and daughters of the privileged class onwards to success (i.e. good jobs in high paying professions) and the sons and daughters of the working class downwards toward the occupancy of the same low status positions that their mothers and fathers currently occupy; this is apparently Goldthorpe's picture of Bourdieu's "overarching theory of social reproduction." The reason for this according to Goldthorpe is that schools, *qua* socializing institutions are expected to encounter obdurate (and according to Goldthorpe's reading of Bourdieu) insurmountable resistance from the already crystallized system of dispositions inculcated in the family environment. In this sense, Goldthorpe claims that Bourdieu thought that schools are *completely powerless* institutions in their role as socializing mechanisms unable to have any effect on the cognitive and emotive dispositions of individuals that are exposed to them.

This also means that according to Bourdieu all of the “variance” in outcomes is due to the family of origin and none to the influence of education.

Is this a fair statement of Bourdieu’s view of the role of the educational system and the origins and operation of habitus? First, it bears to mention that this theory of educational institutions as being completely powerless to change the cognitive make-up of individuals would be a curious theory to hold for a person who wrote a paper entitled *Systems of Education and Systems of Thought*. This view would be incredibly hard to reconcile with the fact that the author of that paper was making the argument that the scholastic institution has no other function than to implant individuals in differentiated societies with the very *categories of thought* that Durkheim and Mauss argued were instilled in more informal ways in “primitive” societies [Bourdieu 1967, 339-340]. For Bourdieu

even though *acquired through the systematically organized learning processes of the school*, and therefore generally explicit and explicitly taught, the patterns which shape the thinking of educated men in “school-going” societies may fulfill the same function as the unconscious patterns (...) [inherent in] such cultural creations as rites and myths (...) belonging to societies with no educational institutions [*ibidem*, 339, italics added].

Bourdieu criticizes Durkheim for focusing solely on the “moral integration” function while ignoring the “cognitive integration” that schools produce among individuals in contemporary societies. For Bourdieu

the patterns informing the thought of a given period can be fully understood only by reference to the school system, *which is alone* capable of establishing them and developing them, through practice, as the habits of thought common to a whole generation” [*ibidem*, 342].

As I have already done above, it is very simple to show that Bourdieu held no such view of the impotence of the educational system. Instead Bourdieu argued that “academic capital is in fact the guaranteed product of the *combined effects* of cultural transmission by the family and *cultural transmission by the school*.” While it is true that the efficiency of this process of cultural transmission “*depends* on the amount of cultural capital inherited by the family,” Bourdieu never argued that schools are unable to change or partially modify individual dispositions acquired therein.¹ Instead, “through its *value-imposing operations*, the school also helps (...) to form a gener-

¹ In mainstream statistical parlance, this is the difference between the main effect (additive) of schooling and an interaction effect (multiplicative) effect of schooling in combination with family background, which Bourdieu predicts would increase the main effect of schooling; however Bourdieu never argued that the main effect of schooling will be zero net of class background.

al, transposable disposition towards legitimate culture” [Bourdieu 1984, 23, italics added].

For Bourdieu “each social space – family *or* school, for example – functions as one of the sites where *competence is produced*” [*ibidem*, 88, italics added]. In addition according to Bourdieu, *both* the family and the school produce cultural capital but they do so in different ways, since one relies on an “implicit” and the other on an “explicit” pedagogy [Bourdieu 1990a]. Thus, “the more the competences measured are recognized by the school system, and the more ‘academic’ the techniques used to measure them, the stronger is the relation between performance and educational qualification.” This last, as an indicator of “the number of years of *scholastic inculcation*, guarantees cultural capital more or less completely, depending on whether it is inherited from the family *or acquired at school*.” In fact, in summarizing the findings in *Distinction*, Bourdieu notes that

two basic facts were thus established: on the one hand, the very close relationship linking cultural practices (or the corresponding opinions) to educational capital (measured by qualifications) and, *secondarily*, to social origin [Bourdieu 1984, 13, italics added].

Given the above, following Meyer [1977] one may fault Bourdieu for imputing *too much* power to educational institutions as “processing” and not “certifying” systems (although Bourdieu does that too), not too little as Goldthorpe’s reading implies.

Claim 2: Bourdieu’s theory of class reproduction predicts complete stasis in the distribution of educational attainment by class of origin. Thus, any evidence of mobility from low status origins to higher levels of educational attainment serves to completely invalidate Bourdieu’s theory. According to Goldthorpe, Bourdieu’s theory of class reproduction predicts absolutely no “mobility” in the educational system (i.e. working class individual attaining university and post-graduate degrees). Goldthorpe points to research that shows consistent increases in the educational mobility of younger cohorts in Europe and the U.S. as decisive and incontrovertible evidence that Bourdieu’s theory of class reproduction is refuted by the facts. For Goldthorpe this claim is inherently tied to his rather problematic distinction between Bourdieu’s (domesticated and unoriginal but “sound”) theory of *extra-institutional* influences on educational outcomes and his (wild and original but “unsound”), “overarching theory of class reproduction.” For Goldthorpe:

(...) from one – restricted – viewpoint, Bourdieu’s account of the role of cultural capital in maintaining class inequalities in educational attainment might be seen as a rather typical expression of the educational sociology of the 1960s. In this perspective, Bourdieu’s contribution does not appear as highly original but could be regarded as sound or, at all events, as not obviously mistaken. If, however, Bourdieu’s

explanation of educational inequalities is understood – as indeed it should be understood – as forming an integral part his larger theory of social reproduction, it can surely claim originality. But, one must then ask: is it also sound? And just as surely, I would argue, it is not. It fails because the theory of social reproduction itself fails, and quite demonstrably so [Goldthorpe 2007].

Goldthorpe then goes on to note that,

To hold, as Bourdieu in effect does, that the development and functioning of modern educational systems essentially confirm and stabilise the processes through which individuals and families maintain their social positions over time lacks *prima facie* plausibility. That such a claim can be made does indeed raise serious questions about the theoretical adequacy of both Bourdieu's macro- and micro-sociology: for example, in the former case, as regards the very shadowy role accorded to the state or, in the latter, as regards the grossly "over-socialised" view of the individual that the concept of habitus implies. However, for present purposes at least, it is sufficient to concentrate on empirical issues [*ibidem*].

First, it is unclear whether Bourdieu's view of the role of education in class reproduction can be adequately characterized as suggesting that "the development and functioning of modern educational systems essentially confirm and stabilise the processes through which individuals and families maintain their social positions over time." The problem with this statement is not that it lacks "*prima facie* plausibility" but that it is pitched and phrased in such vague and confusing terms that it is "not even wrong" since it lacks any clear empirical implications. What does Goldthorpe mean by "confirming a process?" While a process can certainly be stabilized, it is unclear to me what exactly would be to "confirm it." Anybody who has carefully read Bourdieu can certainly uncover much more straightforward (and *empirically testable*!) statements on his views on education.

Having thus managed to provide only the most meager and conceptually unhelpful statement of Bourdieu's view on the role of education on class reproduction, Goldthorpe's goes for what he believes is *coup de grace*: discussing evidence for what has to be one of the most commonplace and established findings in the history of modern scientific sociology: the fact that throughout the Twentieth century, most Western societies experienced a dramatic "educational expansion" with the predictable consequence that a large proportion of previously "unschooled" children were able to achieve higher levels of schooling than their parents within a generation [Boli, Ramirez, and Meyer 1985], an expansion that continues to this day in higher education across the world [Schofer and Meyer 2005].

Citing data consistent with this well-known effect for London and Wales by Halsey, Heath and Ridge, Goldthorpe is satisfied to report that "in two respects, the

Bourdieu's position is powerfully controverted by these simple and straightforward findings" [Goldthorpe 2007]. He goes on to quote Halsey and collaborators to the effect that schools "were doing far more than 'reproducing' cultural capital; they were creating it, too (...). They were not merely maintaining a 'cycle of privilege' in which cultural capital is acquired by those from educated homes." This presumably "controverts" Bourdieu's views because his theory allegedly predicts *zero* inter-generational educational mobility (i.e. in Bourdieu's topsy-turvy world if you cross-classify parental education with son's or daughter's education, according to Goldthorpe *all [or most] of the cases should be concentrated in the diagonals*).

But if Bourdieu believed that we are stuck in a never-ending "cycle of privilege," with schools unable to transmit any new competence and skills beyond that transmitted by the family of origin, why would he write that

Generally increased schooling has the effect of increasing the mass of cultural capital which, at every moment, exists in an "embodied" state. Since the success of the school's educative action and the durability of its effects depend on how much cultural capital has been directly transmitted by the family, it can be presumed that the efficiency of school-based educative action tends to rise constantly, other things being equal [Bourdieu 1984, 133].

Thus, for Bourdieu, there is no "zero-sum" quantum of cultural resources hoarded by high-status families that the educational system has little power to affect. Instead it is clear that Bourdieu's reasoning here – "its effects depend" – is more consistent with the logic of an "interaction effect" where children from high education backgrounds are *relatively* more likely to attain increasing levels of schooling which then leads to their children attaining more schooling, etc. This dynamic, coupled with the increasing attainment of low-status backgrounds individuals due to expansion leads to an increase in the overall "amount" of cultural capital in the entire society over time (which also leads to "credential-inflation" processes as Bourdieu argued in detail [*ibidem*, 139-168]). This is not possible under the restrictive version of the theory that Goldthorpe attributes to Bourdieu.

Even more puzzlingly, Goldthorpe appears to intimate that the Halsey *et al.* data – which clearly is referring to increasing rates of educational attainment by children of low-status backgrounds *in the wake of the expansion of mass education* – represents unequivocal evidence against Bourdieu's account of the role of the educational system in class reproduction. It is unclear to me whether Goldthorpe is actually serious on this issue. If he is serious, then I think he's being a bit disingenuous. The reason for this is that even though he does not discuss it in any detail, he is very well aware that an *expansion of the educational system will create "mobility" from low status origins to high education destinations even in the presence of substantial inheritance*

effects [Breen and Jonsson 2005, 225]. This is the difference – as Goldthorpe is well acquainted – between “structural” and “exchange” mobility [Sobel, Hout, and Duncan 1985].

Now, for Goldthorpe’s argument regarding the allegedly crucial importance of evidence dealing with mobility into higher educational strata in the presence of educational expansion to be taken seriously in this context, we would have to believe two things: 1) Bourdieu subscribed to a theory that was so conceptually brittle and removed from empirical reality that it predicted perfect conservation of educational inheritance over time *even in the wake of educational expansion* (i.e. the theory can’t tell the difference between mobility solely due to expansion versus mobility due to “exchange” net of expansion). And 2) Bourdieu himself must have no idea of the existence of simple data on educational expansion and increased schooling rates of low-status background individuals that clearly contradicted such a silly hypothesis.

Neither is of course the case. Bourdieu was well aware of the *fact* of post-war educational expansion (which happened in France just as everywhere else), he was well aware that this educational expansion implied mobility into higher educational strata for the sons and daughters of persons of working class and farm statuses, and he very well understood the empirical and conceptual difference between structural and exchange mobility. Thus, he clearly could not have thought that his view of the role of education in class reproduction in modern societies was invalidated by post-war trends toward “openness” of the educational system due to expansion. What his reproduction theory does imply is that – and the strength of this effect may be specific to each national context – *even in the wake of expansion the inheritance effect net of structural mobility should be still substantial and probably fairly constant over time* [Shavit and Blossfeld 1993].²

So was Bourdieu aware of increasing trends toward increasing educational attainment among individuals from low status origins? Of course he was. In *Distinction* [Bourdieu 1984, 132-133] he reports that “many fewer small craftsmen and shopkeepers aged 45-54 than office workers have at least the BEPC (...) but their 18 year-old sons are equally likely to be in school.” Bourdieu is here using information from a figure that shows *increasing rates of educational attainment for 18-year old of all backgrounds, with the steepest slopes for those of the lowest status backgrounds (i.e. farm workers and manual workers)* [*ibidem*, 159, fig. 7]. This evidence essentially tells the same story for France as the vaunted Halsey *et al.* study that

² Thus, data that shows decreasing levels of association between status of origin and net of structural expansion counts against Bourdieu’s hypothesis, while data that shows persistent association net of expansion is consistent with it [for a review of this research see Breen and Jonsson 2005].

Goldthorpe [2007] brings up as providing conclusive evidence “in opposition to Bourdieu’s theory of social reproduction.” Now if the fact of increased overall attainment in the wake of expansion was so fatal for Bourdieu’s reproduction theory, why would he go to such great pains as to actually include a figure in his book in which this damning evidence was displayed so clearly? And why on earth would he spend a several pages discussing this evidence [Bourdieu 1984, 132-133; 157-160, tab. 15]?

The only explanation is that either Bourdieu had no clear idea of what his theory implied in terms of empirics, or that he was such an incompetent scholar, and therefore so unable grasp the match of theory to evidence as to not realize how contradictory the evidence on expansion that he himself presented was for his theory. Neither of these is of course a reasonable conclusion. It is much more pertinent to conclude that Bourdieu’s theory of reproduction is *not* what Goldthorpe says it is, and that the evidence on expansion while falsifying the Frankenstein monster of a theory that Goldthorpe has constructed from a combination of secondary sources, quotes taken out of context from early works and his imagination, does not falsify Bourdieu’s actual theory of the role of education in class reproduction (once again most clearly laid in out in *Distinction* and *The State Nobility*).

When we look at what Bourdieu actually wrote, we find that he was perfectly able to understand the difference between structural and exchange mobility, and therefore discussed the evidence on structural expansion – what he referred to as “morphological change” [Bourdieu 1985, 157] – as actually *being relevant* for his overall argument, and said so very clearly. As he notes in criticizing those who would mistake *expansion* for an increase in *fluidity* (“democratization”) in higher education, one cannot

(...) speak of a “middle class dominated” university unless he had, consciously or unconsciously, confused *the level* of representation of the middle classes in the faculty-student population with *the chances* of faculty entrance for the middle classes – in other words, confused *change in the social composition* of the faculties with change *in the structure of probabilities* of schooling, a structure which has been shifted upwards without real transformation [Bourdieu 1984, 160, italics added].³

Given this, it strains credulity to suppose with Goldthorpe that

it is then scarcely possible to rescue Bourdieu’s theory of social reproduction by claiming that it is in fact to be understood in “relative” terms – i.e. that the reproduction to which it refers is no more than the reproduction over time of the relative

³ Bourdieu [1993, 113] also refers to educational expansion as a motor for the production of culture consuming publics.

probabilities with which children of differing class origins achieve certain levels of educational success and, further, certain levels of employment and associated positions within the class structure [Goldthorpe 2007].

It is clear that whatever Goldthorpe is shadowboxing against, it is certainly his own construction of Bourdieu's theory which he conveniently renders powerless to accommodate the obvious fact of structural expansion in the wake of possible preservation in the probabilities of achieving certain positions. It is unclear to me why "it is scarcely possible" to conclude that what Bourdieu was talking about was indeed relative probabilities. Unfortunately for Prof. Goldthorpe, what a sober reading of what he actually said shows is that this was precisely what Bourdieu was talking about. This might make Bourdieu's own theory less "original" and more "sound" than the "wild but original" overarching theory of Goldthorpe's imagination. However, by way of relative contrast this also makes Goldthorpe's own view as unoriginal as Bourdieu's (but equally sound).

Claim 3: For Bourdieu, the content of what is taught in school is radically arbitrary. Schools pass down competences and skills that are inherently class-marked and thus in the interest of the dominant class. In this sense Bourdieu makes no differentiation between "technical" skills and "class culture." Goldthorpe argues that Bourdieu treats all forms of knowledge as radically arbitrary. That is, according to Bourdieu, knowing that Cervantes wrote *Don Quixote* is treated as the same thing as being able to solve a differential equation. Therefore all of the competences that schools impart have a non-necessary connection to actual skills and tasks required to be an able member of certain occupations. From Bourdieu's perspective, according to Goldthorpe, all that schools do is certify and not produce skilled individuals. For Goldthorpe [2007],

The second point to be recognised is one that carries particular significance in combination with the first. It is that the content of cultural capital is regarded by Bourdieu as being in an important sense *arbitrary*. That is to say, Bourdieu refuses to accept that particular forms of culture can, to quote Jenkins [2002, 105; cf. Bourdieu and Passeron 1977, 5-13 esp.], "be deduced or derived from any notions of appropriateness or relative value." Thus, the culture that dominant classes uphold and that in turn directs and informs what is actually taught in schools and colleges cannot claim any intrinsic superiority, nor yet is it open to any more pragmatic validation in terms of the demands that modern societies typically impose upon their members: for example, as regards the knowledge and skills that they have to possess in order to engage in productive work or effective citizenship. Rather, what is taught, as well as how it is taught, has to be understood as being always determined by the interests of dominant classes, and indeed as being so conceived that what counts as cultural capital is what will best ensure the reproduction over time of the prevailing unequal distribution of such capital and thus of social power and privilege more generally [cf. Bourdieu 1973, 80-2; and for critical comment Kingston 2001]. It is especially

important to recognise here that – again in contrast to most mainstream sociologists of education – Bourdieu would reject any attempt to differentiate between those aspects of culture in the teaching of which class or other socially conditioned influences might readily be present, such as, say, the literary canon or national history, and those likely to be more resistant to such influences, such as linguistic, mathematical or scientific knowledge and skills [cf. Bourdieu 1974, 32].

Notice that there are two issues here. First, there is Goldthorpe’s claim that Bourdieu subscribed to the view that all forms of knowledge – scientific, artistic, technical, etc.) are class marked. I think that this is a correct interpretation. In Bourdieu’s rendering not even scientific knowledge can escape the imprint of its origins among leisurely aristocrats in early modern Europe. This is what he has referred to as the “scholastic point of view” [Bourdieu 1988a, 1990b, 381].

However, for Bourdieu *it does not follow* from recognizing the class-marked origins of scientific and technical knowledge-producing institutions that therefore there is no difference whatsoever between technical knowledge and skills (science, mathematics) and other forms of knowledge more clearly recognized as being “class cultures” (i.e. artistic competence, familiarity with classic literature). This would be to subscribe to the most naïve sociological reductionism. Fortunately, this particular claim is easy to dispense with, since it is clear that Bourdieu did not subscribe to such a absurd nominalist position. Instead, according to Bourdieu, in the context of speaking of the tension that existing between educational titles as *markers of prestige* and *signals of skill acquisition*,

(...) while it was absolutely necessary to stress the magical dimension of the title, as opposed to the technical dimension that conceals it, we obviously do not want to lock ourselves into the alternative of the technocratic faith in the exclusively technical foundation of social competence or the radical nominalism *that would credit the educational institution with the power to arbitrarily create dignities*. In fact, the technocratic illusion *is partially justified*, and of the effect of misrecognition at the basis of the magical efficacy of titles, and of the symbolic violence of all acts of nomination, *is only possible because titles also certify the acquisition of technical skills* (along with the properties we might call stylistic or symbolic). Titled individuals are legitimate titulars of exceptional positions, but to a certain extent *they also possess uncommon technical competences, which provide a foundation for their monopoly*. And we also note that the market value of a title, however fully it may depend on the power of symbolic imposition, is always partially determined by the scarcity of the concomitant technical skill in the market [Bourdieu 1996, 118-119, italics added].

Thus, for Bourdieu skills are not reducible to arbitrary class cultures, the value of which is manufactured by educational institutions from whole cloth. Instead, Bourdieu sees the social worth of occupations as being produced by both skill-based and

“prestige” or “symbolic” associations related to the positions associated with those skills [Hope 1982].

Conclusion: Originality, Unoriginality and Theory Building through Borrowing

I wish to close with a comment on the broader tone of Goldthorpe’s essay. It begins and ends with a rather disquieting juxtaposition between research and theory that may be “unoriginal but sound” and research and theory that is “original but unsound.” Goldthorpe concludes that while some “domesticated” version of Bourdieu belongs in the first category, his wild and undomesticated “overarching class theory” (a fallacious construction as I hope to have shown above) belongs in the second. I must say that I find this distinction completely bankrupt. First, it projects towards Bourdieu a desire for “originality” over “soundness” that clearly was not there. Anybody that has taken the time to carefully read Bourdieu cannot come out of the experience without thinking that he was a scientifically minded sociologist as attentive to the empirical adequacy and analytic usefulness of the concepts and theories that he deployed as anybody else. I have very little doubt that in terms of cognitive value commitments if given the choice, he would certainly have chosen “soundness” over “originality” any day of the week and twice on Sundays.⁴

In fact, one gets the impression after reading the anxious and hasty remarks at the end of Goldthorpe’s essay – where he tries to dissociate his own views regarding the preservation of class inheritance net of structural mobility from Bourdieu’s very similar take on the same issues – that it is Goldthorpe who appears to be more concerned with sustaining the “originality” and “purity” of his own views by attempting to suggest (against all textual evidence) that Bourdieu cannot be read as offering a relative probability claim when it comes to patterns of class inheritance on educational attainment over time given structural expansion in the system.

Second, Goldthorpe closes his essay with a dire warning that given its association with such an illogical and empirically bankrupt “overarching” theory of class reproduction, some sort of moratorium should be established on the usage of the

⁴ Other “unoriginal” but sound elements of Bourdieu’s view of the role of education in modern societies are his theory of “credential inflation” which was developed in American shores at about the same time that *Distinction* was published by Randall Collins [1979] and his institutional theory of education as primarily “certifying” rather than “skill imparting” institutions in the modern system, which was being developed contemporaneously in the U.S. by John Meyer [1977] from analogous Durkheimian foundations. Also, his account of credential inflation coupled with the structural unavailability of appropriate jobs for highly credentialed individuals draws on Lenski’s [1954] account of “status inconsistency” [Bourdieu 1984, 572, n. 23].

concept of “cultural capital,” suggesting instead that *his own favored* concept of “cultural resources” takes its place instead.⁵ While I doubt that very many people will take heed of Goldthorpe’s advice, I still see this as an awfully retrogressive precedent to set when it comes to conceptual borrowing from other theorists. Instead, in the spirit of Bourdieu’s [1988b] own celebration of heterodoxy in social science, I propose that theorists should be unfettered in their borrowing concepts from other theorists, without worrying about being contaminated by any allegiance to the larger theoretical systems that those concepts “belong to.” If they had listened to Goldthorpe’s advice for instance, Randall Collins [2004] would not have so creatively adapted the idea of “interaction ritual” from Goffman from fearing that it would be tainted by the latter’s “overarching” dramaturgical model of the social world, or Arlie Hochschild [1983] would not have so influentially adapted the Marxian concepts of alienation and commodification for the study of service and emotional labor in contemporary capitalism for fear of their being tainted by association to some “overarching” theory of historical materialism, and sociology would be a much more conceptually impoverished discipline.

In contrast to Goldthorpe, I propose that scholars should take a completely different attitude towards Bourdieu’s work: it should be appropriated, dismembered and used and modified as the analyst sees fit, rejecting what they don’t need (or find to be in contradiction to the facts).⁶ In this manner, I think his work should be mined without any “contamination” worries [Douglas 1966] and theorists should pick what is useful to them (and the analytical problem at hand) as they deem appropriate, as has already been done so productively by a variety of scholars beginning with DiMaggio [1982] and most recently in the exemplary work of Illouz [1998; 2007] and Lareau [2003]. In fact, precisely because against his own wishes [Bourdieu 1985], the concepts that he developed continue to be thought of as belonging to some “overarching” grand theory – rather than being pragmatic interventions aimed at understanding the social world – I think that this has not been done enough. Bourdieu’s works are full of useful sensitizing concepts, empirically testable hypotheses and suggestions for research, and I hope that they continue to become a rich resource for scholars with similar interests in understanding the workings of the social world.

⁵ This is a striking a performative demonstration that Bourdieu’s own field theory of how scientific fields work must have some validity to it.

⁶ This of course applies to any theorist’s work in my view.

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Comment on John Goldthorpe/5

Three Cheers for Unoriginality

Abstract: In this comment I review Goldthorpe's recent portrayal of the substance of Bourdieu's views on the issues of cultural capital, education and class reproduction, by focusing on three major set of claims that Goldthorpe imputes to Bourdieu. Using more recent and more representative examples of Bourdieu's work on education and class reproduction, I show that Bourdieu did not hold the positions that Goldthorpe says he held and that therefore whatever Bourdieu's "overarching" theory of class reproduction is, it is not what Goldthorpe thinks it is. I conclude that Goldthorpe's call for a moratorium on the use of the concept of cultural capital rests on fallacious views on the role that of "originality" plays in social science and on an overly constrictive attitude toward theoretical borrowing and adaptation in which concepts are seen as somehow "tainted" by the larger presuppositions of the theoretical systems in which they are first embedded.

Keywords: Bourdieu, cultural capital, education, class reproduction, Goldthorpe, social mobility.

Omar Lizardo received his PhD from the University of Arizona in 2006 and is currently an Assistant Professor in the Department of Sociology at University of Notre Dame. His primary research interests are the sociology of culture, the sociology of knowledge, sociological theory, and world systems theory. In a recently published paper he dealt with the effect of cultural tastes on the composition of social networks (*American Sociological Review*, 2006). He is currently working on an extension and elaboration of contemporary theories of culture consumption geared toward the understanding of transnational patterns of cultural trade. Additional work in progress deals with the question of the continuing status of high culture as cultural capital by tracing the impact of fine arts consumption on earnings.