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Cultural capital: objective probability and the cultural arbitrary

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Abstract

This paper attempts to explicate and locate the concept of ‘cultural capital’ in terms of Pierre Bourdieu's more general theory of the forms of capital and their transubstantiations. It examines the manner in which the relationship between the economic field, and its relations of inequality and power, and the cultural field involves a process of systematic misrecognition on the basis of which the positions and relations of the cultural field come to be recognized as ‘arbitrary’. In these terms, pedagogic action is defined as ‘symbolic violence’. It is suggested that the relationship between ‘objective probability structures’ and cultural fields can be usefully approached through the ‘dual aspect’ theory of the philosopher, Benedict Spinoza. Finally, a tension is noted between the manner in which educational differences between classes are explained and the manner in which differences within classes are explained.

Notes

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Bourdieu and Passeron (1977), Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture, will be taken as the major point of reference in this paper because of its influence in the sociology of education. For the general theory of exchange, the unusually accessible Bourdieu (1997) is the major source.

See, for instance, Bourdieu and Passeron (1977, Book I) and the systematic manner in which the terms ‘arbitrary’ and ‘objective’ and their cognates are used in consistently different ways associated with contrasting logics of description and explanation.

An excellent short introduction to Spinoza is to be found in Scruton (1999; see in particular pp. 15–20). A major historical study concerning his place and influence in early Enlightenment thinking is provided by Israel (2001, see chapter 13). Spinoza's principle work is Ethics (Spinoza, 1996).

See, here, Bourdieu and Passeron (1977, p. 119): ‘The opposition between these two types of relation to language stems from the opposition between the two modes of acquiring verbal mastery, the exclusively scholastic acquisition which condemns the acquirer to a “scholastic” relation to scholastic language and the mode of acquisition through insensible familiarisation …’ It is the latter of these ‘modes of acquisition’ that is the work of habitus and cultural capital and Bourdieu consistently downgrades the former relative to it. The key question is, what provides the grounds for the mode of ‘scholastic’ acquisition?

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