BOOK REVIEW

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Jacek Tittenbrun, *Neither capital nor class. A critical analysis of Pierre Bourdieu's theoretical framework*, Wilmington: Vernon Press 2017, pp. 365.

EITHER CAPITAL OR CLASS...

Jacek Tittenbrun has been writing about the concepts of capital, social differentiation and class consistently for several years [2011; 2013; 2014; 2015]. The reviewed book from 2017, referring to Pierre Bourdieu's theoretical framework, thus appears as a logical continuation of his intellectual endeavours. The main justification of his critique is based on a conviction that in the case of Bourdieu's multiplication of capitals and his approach to social class, the original Marxist concept was unnecessarily proliferated and contaminated. If one considers the relationship between Marx and Bourdieu, it must be admitted that it's not clear and many aspects could be a matter of concern. According to a popular narrative, Bourdieu extends Marx's thought using his particular extra-economic notion of capital [Swartz 1997; Fowler 2011; Desan 2013]. However, it seems relevant to ask whether such a theoretical move is well justified and what it means.

Tittenbrun's above-mentioned work is quite long (over 300 pages) with many sub-arguments: ranging from Bourdieu's theoretical insights and its empirical applications to an analysis of his place in the intellectual tradition and public engagement; and from discussions about ownership and capital using 19th century concepts from Frank Fetter and Eugen von Böhm-Bawerk (co-founders of the Austrian school of economics) to a detailed analysis of the EU budget and fiscal

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policy. In his argumentation, Tittenbrun uses many types of sources: in some fragments he focuses on selected works of the French sociologist, and in other places a great volume of secondary literature is dominant (always well-criticised, but not always relevant from the perspective of Bourdieu's legacy).

The book consists of five chapters with different questions and levels of conceptualization. The most important one is the first chapter, which discerns the crucial ideas in Bourdieu's framework such as: class, habitus, social/cultural capital, the mechanism of distinction, and symbolic power. The second chapter is a short digression mapping out structuralism as an essential background for Bourdieu, underlining his dependence on Levi-Strauss's linguistic formalism. The next part of the book is devoted to economic issues like the concepts of rent and ownership, as well as the role of the state and tax policy in EU countries. Here Tittenbrun begins his argument with the suggestion that Bourdieu represents economic imperialism and, like representatives of the first Vienna school, does not properly understand the Marxist concept of capital. This is followed by a chapter dealing with the problem of class and capital in the context of reproduction of social inequality. Here, the author focuses on Bourdieu's assumption that educational attainment is profitable, depending on the level of embodied form of cultural capital. The last part of the book refers to the public engagement of the French sociologist, explaining his activities by the political transformation of leftist intellectuals. Thus, we can read about social solidarity as a core element of the European political project. The conclusion summarizes the principal argument of the whole book and includes reflections on why Bourdieu is so popular despite the fact his analytical tools are fallacious and "utterly redundant" [p. 316].

The style of Tittenbrun's presentation is very characteristic: instead of a reconstruction of the main ideas we find an unconventional understanding of the problem of capital, classes, and symbolic domination, laced with polemic and emotional points of view. From the very first page the reader becomes acquainted with his main allegations against the author of *Distinction*, such as lack of originality (everything had already been discussed by Marx, Weber, and Parsons), formalism (the field of social relations is a formal structure), physicalism (Bourdieu's belief in social laws), reductionism (everything leads to symbolic power), determinism (habitus determines our free choice and is our destiny), and methodological fallacy (confusing outcomes for causes, and class for estate). But most striking is the accusation levelled against the French neo-Marxist about "an extreme form of reductionism and essentialism" identified by Tittenbrun as a claim that "social life is driven by the single logic of capital, or perhaps Capital" [p. 8].

Moreover, for Tittenbrun Bourdieu – influenced by Althusser – is not able to think in a dialectical way: his position is dogmatic (idealistic from one point of view and materialistic from the other) and naturalistic, filled with economic imperialism in a “good” neo-liberal style. But the greatest sin of Bourdieu and his followers is the anthropological usage of the notions of culture and economy, giving them a broad, formal (i.e. not substantive) meaning. This manner of thinking is, according to Tittenbrun, absolutely unnecessary from a sociological perspective. Thus, the notion of cultural capital and the mechanism of distinction are for him meaningless and redundant concepts; they have no explanatory force but are only ornamental obscure the relation of economic exploitation as a source of social stratification. His basic assumption that there is only one capital – economic capital, as defined by Marx – leads him to a strong conclusion: non-economic factors like education, language competence, and taste make no difference.

The main problem with this interpretation is that the collection of arguments presented in the book seem to be the result of an idiosyncratic reading and misunderstanding of Bourdieu’s entire theoretical position by Tittenbrun. Furthermore, his book has a chaotic patchwork-like construction. Except for the first chapter, the rest of the text has little direct connection with Bourdieu and his framework. This is true for several reasons. Firstly, Tittenbrun’s critique is based on a specific substantive relationship between scientific language and reality, working with quotes as if they were autonomous parts of a text and looking for their literal meaning. Secondly, the reasoning is built as a mosaic of both short and very long decontextualized quotes from secondary literature, which persuasively reveal the author’s point of view, but hide his own original line of argumentation.

The most concise argument is that forms of capital are hard to distinguish from each other. Moreover, Tittenbrun suggests that cultural and human capital (related to knowledge and linguistic competences) are the same, and social capital does not exist at all. While a detailed discussion of these remarks is beyond the scope of this review, it is clear that human capital is a part of cultural capital. In addition, cultural capital is, from Bourdieu’s perspective, not just human and belongs not only to individuals. Following the cultural turn in social science that made the role of culture an independent variable is crucial. Since the notion of cultural capital is extremely liquid in Bourdieu’s thought, one can summarize that as a theoretician he preferred a work in progress, looking for the best application of theoretical tools in understanding social reality, governed by the principle of distinction.

Obviously, Bourdieu as an object of critique is not an accidental choice. His mode of thinking and legendary obscure style of writing made him an easy target

[Alexander 1995]. Tittenbrun provokes sustained critical reflection on this influential thinker and is right that the theoretical contribution of the French sociologist remains a network of metaphorical notions and concepts with variable meanings. But we can posit that his influence on social sciences appears quite powerful for one reason: the ‘spirit’ of synthesis that allows one to overcome oppositions in methodological (micro-macro) and epistemological (objective-subjective) perspectives, and combining ethnological and historical insights with a claim to a general theory of practice. Bourdieu’s attempt to make sociology a strong, empirical science, without scientific blindness, has been recognized by many followers and is used in empirical research [Lamont 1999; Bennet et al. 2009].

To conclude, paraphrasing a claim by John Golthorpe (another famous critique of Pierre Bourdieu), we can say that the main aim of Tittenbrun’s book is to prove that everything that is sound in Bourdieu’s theory is not original, and what is original is not sound [Golthorpe 2007]. This audacious attempt is characterized by a hidden purpose: to diminish the scientific importance of Pierre Bourdieu’s output in order to empower his own theoretical position i.e. socio-economic structuralism immersed very deeply in the Marxist-Leninist tradition. The author of *Neither Capital, Nor Class* has developed a critical approach with one doubtful result: so that readers will have little motivation for reading and working on Bourdieusian concepts. Perhaps the author of *Pascalian Meditations* was right: “one kind of critique is only an irreproachable form of murder” [Bourdieu 2000: 61].

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