

The promise of Bourdieusian political sociology

David Swartz. *Symbolic Power, Politics, and Intellectuals: The Political Sociology of Pierre Bourdieu*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013

Bart Bonikowski¹

© Springer Science+Business Media Dordrecht 2015

Abstract This essay provides an analytical review of David Swartz's book on Bourdieu's political sociology. I argue that among its many virtues, the book presents Bourdieu's ideas in an accessible and synthetic manner, adding clarity to what is a complex and often contradictory theoretical system. In addition to assessing the book's contributions, I draw inspiration from Swartz's work to point out some of the limitations of the Bourdieusian perspective and identify promising avenues for the further elaboration of this approach through empirical research.

Keywords Bourdieu · Political sociology · Power · Inequality · Political change · Field theory

Symbolic Power, Politics, and Intellectuals (henceforth *SPP*), the latest addition to David Swartz's influential work on Bourdieu, provides an important analytical overview of Bourdieusian political sociology. The book's intellectual range attests to Swartz's erudition—both in terms of Bourdieu's prolific output and the work of other social theorists and political sociologists—and to his serious concern for the advancement of research in political sociology. Moreover, despite having been written in an accessible manner, the book is not short on ambition. In providing a comprehensive review of Bourdieu's ideas, Swartz skillfully navigates what is often theoretically treacherous territory; indeed, one of his major achievements is imposing coherence on Bourdieu's insightful but often contradictory and vague conceptual apparatus. In providing an exposition and a fair critique of Bourdieu's ideas, the book represents a comprehensive resource for any aspiring political sociologist interested in Bourdieu's

✉ Bart Bonikowski
bonikowski@fas.harvard.edu

¹ Department of Sociology, Harvard University, 636 William James Hall, 33 Kirkland Street, Cambridge, MA 02138, USA

work, but also for more seasoned researchers who could benefit from a refresher on the topic.

Teasing out the politically relevant threads of Bourdieu's work, organizing them into a coherent whole, and providing a critique of their limitations would have been sufficient to make this book an impressive entry into the secondary literature on Bourdieusian theory, but Swartz does not stop there. He goes on to address the ethics of scholarly political engagement, as formulated in Bourdieu's theory of public intellectual practice and also—interestingly—as embodied in Bourdieu's own personal trajectory from an astute observer of society to a politically engaged public figure, and eventually to a fully mobilized political actor. This particular section of the book is fascinating in many respects, not least because it uses field analysis to gain insight into the historical changes in the structure of French academia and mass media discourse, and Bourdieu's winding path through this shifting landscape.

The book makes four overarching points: first, that political sociologists in the United States have not sufficiently incorporated Bourdieu's ideas into their scholarship; second, that this failure should be redressed because Bourdieu's theoretical model and its constituent concepts are good to think with (and important to think with for anyone concerned with social justice); third, that despite the great promise held by Bourdieu's work, his ideas are not without considerable limitations, though these limitations can be transcended through further elaboration of his model; and fourth, that Bourdieu's theory and biography can offer us important ethical lessons concerning scholarly practice and political engagement in the public sphere. I do not address the fourth point in much detail here, but it strikes me that the Foucauldian notion of the "specific intellectual," whereby scholars speak publicly only on topics in which they have some professional expertise, is a far more sensible model than the practice of the Sartrean "total intellectual," who uses his or her symbolic capital to pontificate authoritatively on any topic that comes along. Bourdieu was faithful to the former model for a good part of his life, but shifted somewhat to the latter in his last decade.

In addressing Swartz's three remaining points, I begin with some of the limitations of Bourdieusian theory, then move on to a brief evaluation the subfield's response to Bourdieu's work, and conclude with some comments on what I see as the continued promise of Bourdieu's ideas for political sociology. Why start with the limitations? As I hope will become clear, being aware of some of the drawbacks of Bourdieu's perspective can help us understand its uneven adoption into political sociology; at the same time, acknowledging these weaknesses can bring into relief the strengths of Bourdieu's work, while also giving us a sense of how best to incorporate his ideas into our research.

One of the virtues of *SPPI* is that Swartz does not hesitate to evaluate Bourdieu's ideas critically. That this critique is often generous stems from Swartz's undeniable passion for Bourdieusian theory and his objective further to popularize Bourdieu's work, and particularly those aspects of it that lend themselves to sociological research on politics. What Swartz sees as mild inconsistencies, however, may be perceived by others as major flaws. Whether those flaws are fatal depends not only on the substance of Bourdieu's arguments but also on one's approach to social theory—whether one treats theoretical frameworks as complete worldviews or as assortments of conceptual tools that can be utilized selectively in the pursuit of specific empirical problems.

Thanks to countless secondary treatments, the general limitations of Bourdieu's work are well known: the frequent definitional imprecision and conceptual slippage; the unresolved tensions between determinism and voluntarism and their consequences for social reproduction and transformation; an excessive reliance on empirical data from a single national case (a failing from which American sociologists are hardly immune); an overemphasis on early childhood socialization; a problematic use of economic concepts for all aspects of social life; an excessive confidence in scholarly objectivity and detachment; and the rather patronizing faith in the ability of social scientists to pierce through the false consciousness that ostensibly plagues dominated social actors (what Bourdieu's French critics have called "the sociology of suspicion"). In addition to these general and well-understood limitations, however, there are a few weaknesses in Bourdieu's theory that are more particular to political sociology and, as I argue, pose some challenges for the full incorporation of his work into the subfield.

First, Bourdieu's theory of power neglects power as capacity, that is, "power to" rather than "power over," without which it is difficult to understand the development and functioning of modern liberal democracy. As Paul Starr (2007) and others have shown, power isn't always a zero-sum struggle; certain institutional arrangements can in fact enhance individual and collective capacity, thereby expanding the size of the proverbial pie. Bourdieu's Marxian-inspired framework is unlikely to help us understand the process through which this occurs, because it is overly preoccupied with status group competition rather than with comparative institutional analysis. Perhaps it is possible to extend his work in this direction, but that would require a reformulation of his core notions of power and domination.

Second, Bourdieu's theory of the state is rather rudimentary. Consisting largely of the interplay between the bureaucratic and political fields and the field of power, it places emphasis on the compositional stratification of the political cadre, in a vein similar to Mills (1956) and Domhoff (1967), but makes little headway in understanding the dynamics of political contestation within parties and across them, explaining the changing electoral coalitions that drive policy change, or illuminating the relationship between social movements and the political field. What account there is of state development and state power is surprisingly reductive, often attributing to states an ideological coherence and level of social penetration that few of them actually possess. Given the centrality of the state for political sociology, the underdevelopment of this aspect of Bourdieu's theory is a serious limitation. The building blocks for a more complete state theory may be present in Bourdieu's work, but these need considerable elaboration. Bourdieu's decentralized view of the state as a field of struggle rather than a singular organ of power, which echoes the framework famously proposed by Skocpol (1985) in "Bringing the State Back In," is certainly a worthy starting point.

Third and finally, as Swartz readily acknowledges, Bourdieu lacks a comprehensive theory of social change. Aside from his passing references to hysteresis, exogenous political shocks, and field fragmentation as possible catalysts of change, we learn little about how institutions are transformed over time, where and why opposition to the status quo emerges in the political field, what accounts for the success or failure of political mobilization, why some state classification practices succeed while others fail, and so on. In fact, I would argue that Bourdieu's emphasis on social reproduction is at the heart of his late and incomplete incorporation into political sociology.

Consider the fact that Bourdieu's work has had the most profound impact on research at the intersection of culture and stratification, beginning with studies of cultural capital, followed by research on social capital, and more recently with field analysis and the study of embodiment (Lizardo 2012). Why did Bourdieu find such success in stratification research but a more muted reception in political sociology? The reasons are undoubtedly multiple, from the legacy of macro-level materialism in political sociology to the well-defined division of labor in the discipline that has constrained the substantive focus of the subfield. But another important reason, I would argue, is that the study of inequality is primarily concerned with documenting and explaining social reproduction, whereas political sociology is primarily interested in explaining social and political change. From state building, through social revolutions, to social movement mobilization, political sociology is the study of the dynamic interplay of the state and society, a relationship where change comes in fits and starts to be sure, but where stasis is the exception, not the rule. It is little wonder then that it took political sociologists some time to appreciate Bourdieu's work and that some of his concepts have been adopted more extensively than others—field more than capital and both of these more than habitus.

All of these shortcomings could pose major problems if we had to take on Bourdieu's framework wholesale as a unified theory of the social and political world. Fortunately, however, this is not necessary. Part of the beauty of Bourdieu's work is that it offers both general principles for sociological research and a wide array of specific concepts, some of which may be more or less useful for particular research problems. In general terms, Bourdieu impels us to think relationally, to perceive the workings of power outside the traditional realm of politics, to question and to historicize taken-for-granted assumptions about the social world, and to extend our understanding of oppression and violence from the material to the symbolic. These are all important principles for how we should practice political sociology.

So why have political sociologists not embraced this perspective, as Swartz forcefully argues in the book? Or have they? Here, I take issue with Swartz's characterization of the subfield: despite a rather late entry into political sociology, Bourdieu's influence has become widespread. Indeed, *SPPI* cites over a dozen American political sociologists whose work has been setting the agenda in the subfield for well over two decades. And if one were to expand the definition of Bourdieu's influence from the use of his theoretical concepts to the adoption of his general philosophy of political research, the list would grow even longer. It seems to me, then, that Bourdieusian theory, for all its limitations, is doing very well in American political sociology.

This is not to say, of course, that there is no room for further progress. Indeed, the advantage of Swartz's book is that it sows intellectual seeds in what is already fertile soil. Political sociologists are eagerly incorporating Bourdieu's ideas into their work, but that is precisely why now is the perfect moment for further clarification of those ideas and for setting an agenda for the future. I will briefly outline five areas of research that could benefit from further engagement with Bourdieu's work, in substance or at least in spirit.

The first is research on routine nationalism and other forms of collective political identification. The nation-state is one of the most extensively institutionalized and misrecognized cultural categories in contemporary politics. Far from being a simple feature of political reality, the affective power of nationalist claims is routinely used in

political mobilization, often in a manner that classifies and excludes broad categories of people. This everyday political practice is in need of Bourdieusian demystification. Important inroads into this topic have been made by scholars like Rogers Brubaker, but more work remains to be done. How do meanings of the nation vary within countries and how are these competing ideas deployed in struggles within the political field? How does the heterogeneity of cultural models of the nation within specific countries become subsumed under dominant national myths and whose interests does this serve? How do national narratives map onto ethnic classifications and in what ways do these have an impact on the ability of dominated actors to gain entry into the political field? Under what circumstances does the nation become salient in everyday life and how are such moments exploited for political gain? These are but a few starting points for future research on this important topic.

Second, we need to pay more attention to political discourse and specifically to the moral categories through which political claims are justified. How political actors frame their policies, whom they classify as unworthy of inclusion in state programs, and what meta-narratives they wield in support of their policy projects are not simply matters of short-term political strategy. Over time, the terms of particular debates become institutionalized and taken-for-granted and, as a result, play an important causal role in setting the conditions of possibility for subsequent political struggle. Such cultural path-dependence often results in symbolic violence to those whose interests are ignored and whose voices are not heard. Our understanding of these processes has been enriched by existing research (e.g., Steensland 2006), but here too we have only begun to scratch the surface of what is possible.

Third, I would argue that the prospects for Bourdieusian field theory have never looked better and the opportunity to elaborate this perspective further should be seized on by young scholars. While field-theoretic research has been gaining traction in political sociology for over a decade, the trend has reached a peak with the recent publication of Fligstein and McAdam's (2012) *A Theory of Fields*, which combines the field perspective with organizational theory, as well as a theory of social change rooted in social movement research. The powerful account of political dynamics offered by this approach could be further enriched by a substantive theory of how power is distributed in modern democracies. As such, field theorists could benefit from a meaningful re-engagement with Bourdieu's ideas and particularly with his promising but understudied concept of the field of power.

The fourth area that is ripe for scholarly inquiry transcends the boundaries of individual nation-states, within which so much political sociology (including Bourdieu's own) had long been trapped. The growing interest in transnational processes, supranational identities, and global dynamics of economic, political, and military power has given rise to exciting new research. Much of it, however, either lacks an overarching theoretical framework or relies on the same two paradigms that have dominated globalization studies, that is, world systems theory and world polity theory. Although useful in their own right, these perspectives are too rooted in methodological nationalism and reductive globalism to offer us analytical purchase on the rapidly evolving multiplex networks of power that characterize the contemporary world order. What is needed instead, I would argue, is a more analytically nimble approach that builds on Bourdieu's work, like Mann's (1986) network theory of power or Steinmetz's (2007) or Go's (2011) theories of global fields, all of which take into account

multilayered power configurations that transcend national boundaries. This kind of research is the future of macro-level political sociology.

The final area of research to mention is the study of social movements, which is just beginning to come to terms with the impact of social media and other information and communication technologies. These developments are fundamentally reshaping the field of political contention, but we lack the conceptual tools to grasp this transformation fully. This is a perfect opportunity for bringing together Bourdieusian field theory with Internet studies and organizational sociology, so that we can gain purchase on how technological change affects field topography, the entry of new players into the political realm, and the repertoires of contention available to actors who seek to challenge existing configurations of power.

Finally, I want to offer a brief note on methods. For many decades, the methodological options available to political sociologists were limited to survey analysis, historical research, interview methods, and ethnography. Bourdieu's distaste for standard survey research techniques is well known and not without merit. Yet, for all their drawbacks, surveys have been the only method that has allowed researchers to make large-scale distributional claims about the role of culture in politics. That is no longer the case. We are witnessing a major transformation of data collection practices in the social sciences with the massive proliferation of systematically recorded, easily accessible, and fully digitized online data. From tweets and Facebook wall posts to tracked consumption practices and geocoded phone communications, the ability of sociologists to measure the exchanges of capital, map the contours of fields, and observe the live workings of habitus has never been more extensive. Of course, these technological developments are rife with their own power dynamics that need serious scholarly scrutiny, but that is a matter for another essay.

In closing, I highly recommend *Symbolic Power, Politics, and Intellectuals* to political sociologists both novice and seasoned. It is sure to inspire new venues of research and to cast existing work in a new light. Swartz's book invites us to play around with Bourdieu's rich stock of ideas, to appreciate his incisive understanding of the social and political world, and to shed some of the doxa that pervade American sociology. That in so doing the book also happens to be highly engaging and even-handed bodes well for its reception. And that is a good thing, because Swartz's success in getting political sociologists to wrestle with Bourdieu's ideas will be the success of the subfield and the discipline.

References

- Domhoff, G. W. (1967). *Who rules America?* Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Fligstein, N., & McAdam, D. (2012). *A theory of fields*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Go, J. (2011). *Patterns of empire: The British and American empires, 1688 to present*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Lizardo, O. (2012). The three phases of Bourdieu's U.S. Reception: Comment on Lamont. *Sociological Forum*, 27, 238–244.
- Mann, M. (1986). *The sources of social power* (Vol. I: A History of Power from the Beginning to A.D. 1760). New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Mills, C. W. (1956). *The power elite*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Skocpol, T. (1985). Bringing the state back in. In P. E. Evans, D. Rueschemeyer, & T. Skocpol (Eds.), *Bringing the state back in* (pp. 3–43). New York: Cambridge University Press.

Starr, P. (2007). *Freedom's power: The true force of liberalism*. New York: Basic Books.

Steinmetz, G. (2007). *The Devil's handwriting: Precoloniality and the German colonial state in Qingdao, Samoa, and Southwest Africa*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Bart Bonikowski is Assistant Professor of Sociology at Harvard University. His research applies insights from cultural sociology to the study of political processes, including the diffusion of attitudes across political networks, national identification, and moral claims-making in political discourse. He is currently conducting research on populist politics, the collective dynamics of national attachment, and the affective dimensions of popular nationalism.