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Bourdieu and May 68: from student demography to political crisis

Pierre Bourdieu and History

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I would first say, as a way to introduce myself, that I'm not a historian, but a sociologist who sometimes studies social contexts and events from the past. I mainly work on social movements and as such I have worked on contemporary but also past mobilizations, and especially the May 68 revolt on which I will focus in this presentation; I now work on past authoritarian regimes such as the Vichy regime and the last Argentinian dictatorship, that hopefully belong to the past. Doing this, I follow Bourdieu's invitation to cross and subvert institutional academic frontiers and to claim for a unity of social science, despite differences in methods and data. This invitation is taken for granted in my field of research, as its leading figure, Charles Tilly, was both a historian and a sociologist, but I know that it might be less obvious in some other fields of research.

Bourdieu's contributions are essential for any scholar working on the May 68 revolt, first of all because he was already known as a specialist of the student population when the insurgency broke out in Nanterre and then in the Sorbonne. One cannot understand the social and demographic transformations the French University has experienced after World War II without taking a look at Bourdieu and Passeron's *Inheritors* that was first published in 1964. But Bourdieu was also, as an academic, a direct witness of the May mobilization, and that helped him to elaborate a peculiar analysis of the event in subsequent writings, the main of them being the last chapter of *Homo academicus*, first published in 1984. It might be said that May 68 has been seminal in Bourdieu's understanding of crises and revolutions—be they political or symbolic—and in his analysis of fields transformations.

First a few words about the *Inheritors*. French University quickly became Bourdieu's main field after his first ethnographic works on the Algerian and Bearnaise societies. During the early 60's, he conducted with Jean-Claude Passeron various research on the French student population, especially in Lille where he was teaching at the time. These data form the empirical basis of the *Inheritors*. The book innovates by giving a sociological explanation of the underrepresentation of students of lower-

class origin: they are disadvantaged in the school competition because they don't share the familiarity with legitimate culture the school institution valorises. Contrary to their peers of higher-class origin, they don't inherit from their parents the *cultural capital* the school, and then the university, expect from them.

To put it shortly, the conclusion of the book is that pupils from the lower classes are eliminated through their curricula because they cannot show something the educational institution expects from them, this diffuse familiarity with legitimate culture that Bourdieu and Passeron call the cultural capital. There is a hidden social inequality towards education because school expects from all pupils something some families, mainly those from the lower classes, are unable to grant their children. The "ideology of the gift" is an institutional lie that legitimates this elimination of the poorest children from the educational system. Considering the student population in the early 60's, it is no surprise to find very few workers' or farmers' children: they have already been eliminated at earlier stages of the educational curricula.

This analysis was repeated and consolidated in subsequent writings, and especially in an article titled "l'examen d'une illusion", where Bourdieu and Passeron focus on the crucial role exams play in this process of social elimination. This article was published in a special issue of the *Revue française de sociologie* dedicated to the sociology of education and published, by no coincidence, in 1968. Above all, the analysis was systematized in a later book by Bourdieu and Passeron, *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture*, that was published in 1970. The book presents a rigorous model of how the cultural capital is transformed into educational capital and then contributes to the reproduction of social hierarchies. It endorses the fact that in modern societies, the educational institution plays a new central role in the reproduction of hierarchised social structures. Bourdieu would later show this on different fields, for example that of business leaders who not only own their firms but have diplomas—from business schools, for example—that legitimate them to run them: in that case, economic capital needs to be legitimated by educational capital, under the form of diploma, to consolidate social domination.

This new centrality of the educational system in the social reproduction process has had strong but also ambiguous effects. The first has been the dramatic growth of the student population after World War II, from around 150 000 students at the beginning of the 50's to around 600 000 as the 60' were ending. This first meant some practical problems: the building of new campuses, often in suburbs such as Nanterre, and the appointment of new young teachers at the lowest ranks of the academic hierarchy (*assistants*). It also meant, from a demographic point of view, the enlargement of the student population recruitment, with more students from middle class and, to a lesser extent, from worker class origin. Globally speaking, the 60's have experienced the end of the bourgeois university and its transformation into a mass university, with a slow "democratization" of its recruitment.

From this point of view, it could be said that the empirical constataions on which *The Inheritors* was based were no longer valid in 1968, just four years after its publication. *The Inheritors* showed how the academic system fitted to students of

bourgeois origin. A few years later, the arrival of many students of lower-class origin would put the university system in crisis—a crisis that would break out in May 68, and that Bourdieu would analyse in the last chapter, “the critical moment”, of *Homo Academicus*.

A few words before presenting this analysis. The book *Homo Academicus* was published in French 16 years after the May 68 revolt, and Passeron says in his obituary that Bourdieu thought that social sciences need time if they want to properly explain main events, as time is needed to cool off their individual affective perturbations. Passeron also says that Bourdieu and him scarcely participated to the event itself, as they were mainly occupied by the achievement of the book *The Craft of sociology* they would publish that same year with Jean-Claude Chamboredon. For their parts, members of the Centre de sociologie européenne participated to the event distributing leaflets about the democratisation of the educational system (they were probably those texts that appear in the *Political Interventions* book Franck Poupeau and Thierry Discepolo have edited). It seems, however, that Bourdieu was very sensitive to the student revolt, and that he assisted to several general assemblies and the observations he made there have nourished some pages of *Homo Academicus*, to which I turn now.

The increase in the number of students was not homogenous, and some academic disciplines benefited more than others from it. “New students”—meaning students of middle and lower classes—were mainly attracted by “new disciplines” such as sociology (mostly for boys) and psychology (mostly for girls), whose indeterminacy allowed them to postpone their professional choices. Raymond Boudon has also stressed this mechanism, although he is often depicted as Bourdieu’s sociological antagonist: students of modest origin did not benefit from their parents’ advice and made less assured academic choices. They were the first generation in their families to access to university, whereas their bourgeois peers benefited from the advice of their parents who have passed through the university, knew how it worked and enabled them to make better choices. Valid information in order to make rational choices appears decisive from this point of view.

A classic economic mechanism stems from this demographic process: that of devaluation. The increase in the number of students provoked a devaluation of academic diplomas, which caused a generalized downclassing. Too many people having the same diploma, its value is devaluated on the labour market and provokes deception for those who have worked hard to obtain it but cannot attain the post they expected. This mechanism has been coined *hysteresis* by Bourdieu and designates the fact of building expectancies on a state of things that is no longer valid. In other words, there is a hiatus between statutory expectations, based on a previous state of the system, and the opportunity really provided by the diploma.

Bourdieu says that this downclassing was particularly intolerable for the more privileged students, who could expect from their elders’ experience that a familial inherited cultural capital would be enough to permit social reproduction, and saw that they were condemned to a lower position than their parents. Devaluation of diploma was also hard to accept for middle and worker class students who expected a stronger social mobility from their new access to university, and found that their diploma

offered them disappointing positions. In short, devaluation in diplomas has provoked social disappointment and has nourished resentment towards the institution—the university—that has not kept its promises of social reproduction (in the case of bourgeois students) or of social mobility (in the case of students of modest origin). This resentment towards the academy was to be transformed into the anti-institutional mood that Bourdieu finds emblematic of the May revolt and of its aftermaths, and generated what he calls a disposition to revolt.

Once again, Bourdieu stresses the fact that this process was not homogeneous within the academic field. The institutions that occupy the highest positions in that field, and especially the *Grandes écoles* were less affected by the crisis than the ordinary universities, and, within the later, established disciplines were less affected than the new ones. Just a short remark here: this applies for Sciences-po, but not for the *Ecole normale supérieure* that was a home base for the Maoist activists. Apart from that, as a matter of fact the student revolt was more acute in social sciences faculties.

At this point, one can consider that by focusing on resentment and on unfulfilled expectations, Bourdieu is close to an American theoretical framework that was quite influential in the 60's: the relative deprivation framework elaborated by scholars such as James Davies and Ted Gurr. This framework pretends that social movements and revolutions explode when people feel frustration because their expectancies are denied by the real state of things, for example when a period of economic growth, that allowed them to make optimistic economic expectancies, is followed by stagnation or by decline. It could be noticed, by the way, that Boudon's "diagnosis" of the May 68 student revolt shares a similar assumption.

There could be a critical point, here, as Bourdieu's hysteresis explanation could be submitted to the same reproach that has been addressed to Davies' and Gurr's frameworks: they say little about the effective transformation of anger and resentment, that are felt by the individual, into an active and collective contention of the social order. Frustration can be a cause of revolt, but it says little about the revolt itself, about the form it takes and about its own dynamics.

I do think that there's a real problem in the weight Bourdieu grants to resentment in his explanation of the May 68 revolt, that I will address later. The thing is that his analysis does not stop here and that he builds a very suggestive explanation of how what was first a student revolt has developed into a global social and political crisis. Bourdieu offers a model that explains how social movements, and sometimes revolutions, start as a limited mobilisation in a given social locus and develop into a generalised crisis.

The main notion he offers to explain such a generalisation is *structural homology*: as every field tend to organise itself around the opposition between dominant and subordinate positions, any agent can declare solidarity with agents holding homologous position in other fields. In other words, it is because they share homologous positions within their own fields that agents can join in the same movement, despite they belong to different fields, share different identities and have different interests.

This process started with the agents who were closer to the students, meaning the new university teachers who occupied subordinate positions within the academic field. Whereas they felt closeness with their students—as they were just a few years older than them—, they felt resentment towards the dominant professors (*mandarins*) who despised them, and towards the university that did not offer them many opportunities to have a satisfying career. Their fear of being blocked in the lowest ranks of academic hierarchy, and that the university wasn't keeping its promise of academic consecration, was different but similar to the fear of social downclassing their students were supposed to be experiencing at the same time.

This is an important point in Bourdieu's model: there was a temporal coincidence between two related but different crises, that of students and that of assistants. In fact, many other fields experienced their own crisis at the time, but the decisive impulsion of the student revolt provoked their *synchronisation* in a global crisis. Whereas in ordinary times each autonomous field has its own rhythm, its own calendar, the revolt has made them converge to a collective time and has helped to unify the mobilisation and produce what French specialist of political crises Michel Dobry calls social fluidification.

As they are close to the academic field, the intellectual field and the field of symbolic production have been strongly affected by the crisis and have intensely contributed to the mobilisation. In the foreword to the English translation of *Homo academicus*, Bourdieu stresses that the intellectuals who showed more solidarity to the students were mostly deprived of academic capital but benefited from a recognition external to the field; he says that figures like Foucault and Althusser, for example, were "academic heretics". The field of symbolic production, for its part, was filled with agents valorising cultural resources but critical towards established cultural hierarchies, meaning those valorised by the university. As such they were prone to express an "heretical attack" against established cultural values and to claim for "spontaneity" and "freedom of expression", and to elaborate a "counter-culture".

Truth is that the May 68 student mobilisation has very quickly spread to many heterogeneous fields: religious field, medicine field, trade union field (with for example the leader of the CGT being challenged by the Renault workers), cinema field (with the cancellation of the Cannes festival), literature field (with the occupation of the *Société des gens de lettres* building), and even the football field. During the years that were to follow May 68, in many social sectors or institutions, established hierarchies would be challenged by their subordinate agents, the major ones being women within the patriarchal family institution. But also relations between pupils and teachers, doctors and patients, psychiatrist and mentally ill, priest and churchgoers, Paris and provinces, straight and homosexual people—to put it shortly relations between dominant and subordinate or normal or deviant—were to be challenged in what Boris Gobille calls a generalized "rupture of allegiances".

With this focus on identification and solidarization, Bourdieu offers a model that explains how social movements can generalise, and sometimes transform into a major crisis or a revolution, but also how they can disaggregate and fade away. The main concept here is *allodoxia*: generalisation is permitted by the identification of agents

who occupy homologous positions but who have different habitus. They seize the opportunity created by the first challengers but, as they belong to a different field, their claims are not the same, and may even be opposite. During the effervescence of the mobilisation, solidarity prevails, and everyone blinds him or herself in the illusion of unity, but Bourdieu warns that it is a “more or less imaginary solidarity” and that it can fade away as difficulties appear. In May 68, the fact that the Communist Party accepted the dissolution of the parliament imposed by de Gaulle and appealed to stop the strikes and to vote in the June elections appears as such a disaggregating act: the political field, with its own functioning, was able to regain its prevalence over political life, and to marginalise collective dissent.

I would like to conclude with a few points.

Homo academicus presents a structural explanation of May 68: the demographic increase in the number of students and university teachers, the structural homology that favours solidarity between various fields, the synchronisation of different fields own rhythms, are structural mechanisms and processes, that affect the whole social world. But, as I previously said, ethnographic observations also nourish Bourdieu’s analysis, and there are very impressive data about the general assemblies. He recalls how some kind of rhetorical violence was used to silence opponents, how what he calls “knockout phrases” were a weapon during the controversies between contending fractions of the movement. He was not able to make it at the time, but a look at the habitus of the main May 68 speakers and leaders would have been interesting to identify how dispositions for leadership were incorporated. He also shows how speaking in the name of workers was a way to silence workers—who don’t always have the skills needed to speak in public—, and these observations have surely informed his analysis of political representation.

The other points have a more critical tone. The fact that the May 68 insurgents were fearing downclassing is not confirmed by subsequent investigations. Sociologist Louis Gruel was the first to stress that the young people—and especially those of modest origin—who were students as the 60’s were ending were worrying about their professional future. Being often the first in their family to access to the university, they enjoyed their new status and its way of life, including the symbolic retributions of the radical political activities of the time, that would expand impressively during the May events.

The research called Sombrero, to which I participated, confirms this. Between 2013 and 2017, me and my colleagues have collected more than 300 life stories among former 68 young insurgents. Their testimonies show that they did not fear diploma devaluation at the time they were students, but that some of them experienced some kind of a downclassing after May 68 because they gave priority to activism in radical left groups. It is only after their revolutionary hopes fade away, for the most part as the 80’s were beginning, that they engaged a reclassification process that, for most of them, helped them attain with some delay the higher social position they could have expected if they had not adopted the anti-institutional mood that appears to be the main legacy of the May and post-May era.