



The Three Phases of Bourdieu's U.S. Reception: Comment on Lamont

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This essay responds to Lamont's (2011) article "How Has Bourdieu Been Good to Think With? The Case of the United States," which appears in this issue.

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INTRODUCTION

Michèle Lamont's timely analysis of the rise of Bourdieu as a major figure in U.S. sociology is certainly a good piece to think with (and against). I was lucky enough to listen to the keynote address in person at the Paris conference, and reading it on "paper" certainly allows for a better appreciation of the depth of insight of Lamont's "insider-outsider" account of what is without a doubt a unique development in the intellectual history of U.S. sociology.

Having come of intellectual age at a point in which Bourdieu's presence in U.S. sociology was well on its way to acquiring "establishment" status, I have joined this conversation rather late, not as an "active participant" in the very process of "diffusing Bourdieu" but more as an active *exploiter* of the very fact of Bourdieu having achieved the intellectual status of a (modern) classic. This makes my own stance and reflections necessarily different in emphasis from Lamont's (from a Bourdieusian viewpoint our different positioning means that we have qualitatively different *interests* as to what is "at stake" here).

In this comment I would like to simply add my own reflections on what I believe is the developmental arch and the *current* state of reception of Bourdieu's work. I have very little to add to the five points that Lamont raises in her essay, the arguments embedded in which I consider to be valid. However, I believe that by circumscribing herself to these five points, Lamont leaves herself open to three main lines of criticism: (1) a portrayal of the scope of the influence of Bourdieu's work on the U.S. scene that is overly narrow and restrictive, (2)

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1 an overemphasis on the importance of the omnivorousness studies, and (3) a
2 lack of historical sense of the evolution of Bourdieu reception in the United
3 States (an admittedly unfair criticism since that was not Lamont's intent).

4 My own tack will be to highlight what I consider to be "three phases" in
5 the reception of Bourdieu's work in the United States. By layering themselves
6 on top of one another chronologically, the theoretical themes and areas of
7 research animated by these phases have produced the current (synchronic)
8 situation—richly illustrated in Lamont's paper—of Bourdieu as the most
9 "multivocal" of contemporary theorists. However, the basic themes that have
10 been central in this reception process have changed in consequential ways, so
11 that the "Bourdieu" that people were drawing from and exploiting in the
12 1980s and 1990s is certainly not the same Bourdieu that is serving as food for
13 thought for many people in the contemporary context.

14 The key question that young scholars face is not *whether* Bourdieu is
15 good to think with (the answer as Lamont demonstrates is undoubtedly yes),
16 but *which* Bourdieu will you be thinking with today?
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19 **THE FIRST PHASE: REPRODUCTION, TASTE, AND CULTURAL** 20 **CAPITAL**

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22 The first phase of reception of Bourdieu's work is certainly associated
23 with the studies of the French educational system co-authored by Jean Claude
24 Passeron and the early reception of *Distinction*. For a U.S. perspective, we
25 may call this the "Princeton/Vanderbilt" phase. The key texts are Paul
26 DiMaggio's seminal review essay in *AJS* (DiMaggio, 1979)—written while the
27 author was still at Harvard—and Rogers Brubaker's still masterful survey in
28 *Theory and Society* of Bourdieu's theoretical debt to the classics (Brubaker,
29 1985). The first connected Bourdieu's work on education and cultural repro-
30 duction to classic themes on stratification and status attainment relevant in
31 U.S. sociology, capturing the *substantive relevance* of Bourdieu's work; the sec-
32 ond made clear for a U.S. audience the obvious lines of connection between
33 Bourdieu's and the "canon" of accepted classical theorists in the U.S. estab-
34 lishment (Marx, Weber, and Durkheim), capturing the *theoretical relevance* of
35 Bourdieu's contribution.

36 It is unlikely that you can claim to be a major figure in U.S. sociology
37 without connecting to the classics and Brubaker's article left no doubt that
38 Bourdieu had the relevant credentials. In the very same way, DiMaggio's
39 review essay and subsequent work left no doubt that Bourdieu was not your
40 standard French theorist, since his work actually had empirical implica-
41 tions—relevant for classic themes in Wisconsin-style status-attainment
42 research—capable of being stated in the form of hypotheses and testable using
43 the standard methodological toolkit. It is obvious that it was this work, and
44 the subsequent small cottage industry that grew around the concept of
45 "cultural capital" (Lamont and Lareau, 1988), that first made Bourdieu a

1 household name in the United States. To this day, one can find the predictable
2 paper at RC28 that includes the “Bourdieu-variable” (usually some arts
3 participation measure) in a status-attainment regression.

4 In this last respect, I would consider the later adaptation of Bourdieu’s
5 work to the problematic of omnivorousness as well as the association of this
6 line of research with quantitative survey analysis to actually belong to a *late*
7 manifestation (the “Vandy” period) of this most basic first phase of reception
8 of Bourdieu’s work. After all, the first high-powered quantitative research arti-
9 cle drawing heavily on Bourdieu’s work to be published in the United States
10 was DiMaggio’s (1982) and it was clearly molded after the arguments in
11 *Reproduction*. However, it was evident early on that Bourdieu’s work on class
12 and taste would become another point of entry into mainstream U.S. sociol-
13 ogy. In this respect, it is important to not underestimate the (to this day
14 unique) Dutch-U.S. collaboration around the journal *Poetics* (which published
15 some early work of Bourdieu on fields of cultural production), which had
16 DiMaggio as associate editor (with the indefatigable Kees van Rees at the
17 other end) and Princeton as a high-prestige institutional collaborator in the
18 United States.

19 This was happening, as Lamont notes, precisely around the time that
20 U.S. cultural sociology was beginning to take off; thus *Poetics* was uniquely
21 positioned to lay the groundwork for the development of a truly transnational
22 scholarly community (which continues to be vibrant to this day) centered
23 around issues of the connection between class, taste, arts participation, and
24 cultural capital. As evidenced by the fact that the majority of the papers at
25 the Paris conference revolved around this theme, it is clear that this is proba-
26 bly the most enduring institutional and intellectual legacy of this first phase of
27 Bourdieu’s reception in the United States.

28 Following this, *Poetics* acquired the (informal) mantle as the unofficial
29 journal of cultural sociology in the United States and its unique identity as a
30 Dutch-U.S. collaboration continues to this day in its co-editorial arrangement
31 (Tim Dowd and Suzanne Jansen). This has allowed the journal to “branch
32 out” of its initial association to studies of cultural taste narrowly conceived to
33 its current status as a journal where all kinds of work associated with cultural
34 sociology can find a home (as evidenced by the recurrent special issues on a
35 wide range of topics). It is unlikely, however, that the journal could have
36 achieved this insider-elite status without first taking advantage of the torrent
37 of interest generated by the (now classic) arguments laid out in *Distinction* and
38 the institutional support provided by scholars making use of those arguments
39 in the United States.

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42 THE SECOND PHASE: FIELD THEORY

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44 I would consider the second phase of Bourdieu’s reception to begin when
45 Bourdieu himself (as pointed out by Lamont) becomes an active participant

1 and manager in his own transatlantic diffusion process in the late 1980s and
2 early 1990s. From a U.S. perspective I would call this the “Berkeley” phase,
3 mostly because this becomes the institutional home from which Loïc Wacquant
4 becomes an active co-manager in the creative project. As noted by Lamont, the
5 key event is the Chicago “workshop” on which *Invitation to a Reflexive Sociol-*
6 *ogy* (published in 1992) is based. But other events around the time are of
7 equal importance, including Bourdieu’s visit to Berkeley and associated lecture
8 (Bourdieu, 1987), as well as the translation and publication of his UC San
9 Diego lecture on “Social Space and Symbolic Power” (Bourdieu, 1989) in
10 *Sociological Theory* and an early version of the 1987 Chicago workshop on
11 which *Invitation* would be based. Another important set of publications at this
12 stage are the edited volumes by Craig Calhoun (another high-status facilitator
13 and sponsor of Bourdieu’s work at this stage), Edward LiPuma, and Moishe
14 Postone, and the Bourdieu/Coleman edited collection (*Bourdieu: Critical*
15 *Perspectives* and *Social Theory for a Changing Society*, respectively) for which
16 Bourdieu and Wacquant (respectively) contributed self-reflexive, sociology of
17 knowledge-inspired articles about the perils of the transatlantic exportation of
18 intellectual works (once again actively managing the reception process).

19 However, I would argue that the key event in this phase is the translation
20 and publication of Bourdieu’s main writings on “fields” in *The Field of Cul-*
21 *tural Production* (Bourdieu, 1993). This provided U.S. readers with a relatively
22 accessible entry point to Bourdieusian field theory. This phase culminates with
23 Rodney Benson’s (1999)—a graduate from Berkeley sociology—influential
24 essay on field theory and media studies in *Theory and Society*, followed by a
25 special issue on a similar subject in the same journal (see, e.g., Couldry, 2003),
26 which did a lot to domesticate the institutional and macro-sociological aspects
27 of Bourdieu’s work. This second phase of Bourdieu reception has in fact
28 recovered the strong connection between Bourdieu’s approach and that
29 advanced in U.S.-style institutional theory (DiMaggio and Powell, 1991).

30 The introduction of Bourdieusian field theory was happening at about
31 the same time as another intellectual movement was taking place in U.S.
32 sociology: the emergence of “third-generation” historical sociology and the
33 flowering of new institutionalism in organizational analysis, which cross-
34 fertilized with the now established “cultural turn.” The growing familiarity
35 with Bourdieu’s more institutional and historical writings (including the
36 criminally underappreciated *Rules of Art* translated in 1996), did a lot to
37 quell some anxieties that Bourdieu’s work had a structuralist, static, or
38 antihistorical bias (a question posed masterfully and the answer to which was
39 left strategically open by Calhoun [1993]).

40 It is no wonder that the field-theoretic insights of Bourdieu’s work are
41 now being fully exploited by third-generation historical sociologists—such as
42 George Steinmetz (2008) and Marion Fourcade (2009)—and those interested
43 in institutions and social change (e.g., Evans and Kay, 2008). Very significant
44 in this last respect have been theoretical statements by Neil Fligstein (e.g.,
45 Fligstein, 2001; Fligstein and McAdam, 2011) and Emirbayer and Johnson

1 (2008), this last publication reinforcing the status of Wisconsin as the other
 2 high-status institutional site for the diffusion of Bourdieu's work in this phase.
 3 As is obvious by this set of examples, this second phase of Bourdieu's reception
 4 is in full swing and probably reaching its apogee right now, being spearheaded
 5 by institutional actors located in the most prestigious departments.

8 **THE (COMING) THIRD PHASE: EMBODIMENT, COGNITION, AND** 9 **ACTION**

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 11 If the first phase of Bourdieu's U.S. reception revolved around *Reproduc-*
 12 *tion* and *Distinction* and the second phase was centered on the essays collected
 13 in *The Field of Cultural Production*, the third phase is beginning to take shape
 14 by revisiting what is quite likely Bourdieu's most difficult work: the revision of
 15 *Outline of a Theory of Practice* that became *The Logic of Practice*. By return-
 16 ing to this text, contemporary scholars at the intersection of cultural and cog-
 17 nitive sociology are rethinking the classical theoretical foundations of the
 18 theory of action. This phase is distinctive because it has no clear institutional
 19 home (although Karen Cerulo's "Culture and Cognition Research Network"
 20 serves as an invisible college of sorts for scholars interested in cognitive
 21 sociology broadly conceived) and no leading intellectual entrepreneurs as it is
 22 happening in a context in which Bourdieu is an established "classic" (and
 23 probably does not need any of those).

24 If the first phase was centered on quantitative methods, and the second
 25 phase brought out those interested in case-based approaches appropriate for
 26 macro-sociological and institutional work (with Lamont's own comparative
 27 and interview-based work serving as a bridge between the two), younger
 28 scholars in the third phase who draw on Bourdieu's "practice theory"
 29 emphasize experiential, ethnographic methodologies inspired by Loïc
 30 Wacquant's call—and demonstration of the productivity of doing (e.g.,
 31 Wacquant, 2004)—to "take Bourdieu to the field" (Wacquant, 2002). This is
 32 evident in the recent work of Matt Desmond (2006), Matthew Mahler (2007),
 33 and Daniel Winchester (2008). Another strand of work focused on approaches
 34 to the analysis of language and situated conceptualization that can recover the
 35 embodied roots of meaning making (Ignatow, 2009). In addition, an entire line
 36 theorizing about the relationship between culture, cognition, and action (to
 37 which I have contributed [Lizardo, 2004, 2007; Lizardo and Strand, 2010]),
 38 one that has reopened some fundamental issues in the sociology of
 39 culture—see, for instance, Vaisey (2008, 2009, 2010)—and the sociology of
 40 morality—(e.g., Ignatow, 2008)—has been inspired by this (re)appropriation
 41 of Bourdieu's work.

42 A predictable roadblock likely to be encountered in this phase concerns
 43 the fact that here we face a Bourdieu who is not just a "sociologist" but who
 44 has already (via *Logic of Practice*) influenced work in cognate disciplines
 45 including cognitive and cultural anthropology as well as linguistics and even

1 cognitive science and psychology (Bloch, 1986; Ingold, 2000; Strauss and
 2 Quinn, 1997; Toren, 1999). Because of this, third-phase considerations of
 3 Bourdieu's relevance are inevitably accompanied by issues of cross-disciplinary
 4 borrowing, disciplinary identity, and even whether this entire undertaking
 5 respects the proper boundaries of what is considered "sociological" in the first
 6 place; it could be that here the obvious transdisciplinary appeal (and intent) of
 7 Bourdieu's work on practice theory may hit the limit of the (self-imposed)
 8 content-based strictures of the U.S. sociological establishment.

9 In spite of the fact that this aspect of Bourdieu's work has certainly captured
 10 the imagination of a critical mass of younger scholars, it is too early to
 11 tell whether this third phase of reception of Bourdieu's work will bear the
 12 intellectual fruits that have been undoubtedly borne by the first two phases
 13 (especially since neither of the first two phases is necessarily over with,
 14 although it is fairly clear that we have entered an era of diminishing returns
 15 vis a vis the first phase).

16 17 18 CONCLUDING REMARKS

19
20 As we have seen, the reception of Bourdieu's work has been uneven and
 21 multilayered, synchronizing itself with various intellectual movements unique
 22 to U.S. sociology (e.g., cultural and historical sociology and the recent revival
 23 of interest in morality, cognition, and embodiment and the unconscious).
 24 Today, an exciting array of work across a wide variety of fields and methodo-
 25 logical stances can claim direct or indirect inspiration from Bourdieu's work.
 26 Cross-fertilization across these different lines of thinking remains somewhat
 27 limited, so that it is more accurate to speak of the diffusion and importation
 28 of different "Bourdieu" (both chronologically and synchronically) than to
 29 speak of the reception of Bourdieu in the singular, an issue that poses concep-
 30 tual and interpretative challenges (Lizardo, 2011). And yes, some of these
 31 Bourdieus may be much better to think with than others.

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