The Legacy of Pierre Bourdieu
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Critical Essays

Edited by
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INTRODUCTION

Preliminary Reflections on the Legacy of Pierre Bourdieu

Simon Susen and Bryan S. Turner

Unsurprisingly, the Second World War had separate and distinctive consequences for different national traditions of sociology. After the War, the dominant and arguably most successful of the Western democracies emerged in North America, and its sociological traditions assumed a celebratory and often triumphalist perspective on modernisation. The defeat of the fascist nations – notably Germany, Italy, and Japan – seemed to demonstrate the superiority of Western liberal democratic systems, and North American sociologists took the lead in developing theories of development and modernisation that were optimistic and forward-looking. The examples are numerous, but we might mention Daniel Lerner’s *The Passing of Traditional Society* (1958) or S. M. Lipset’s *The First New Nation* (1963). At the centre of this post-war tradition stood *The Social System* of Talcott Parsons (1951), which involved the notion that systems could continuously and successfully adapt to environmental challenges through the master processes of differentiation and adaptive upgrading. In many of his short essays, he analysed the problems of German and Japanese modernisation and saw the United States of America as a social system that had successfully adapted to the rise of industrial modernisation. In its assessment of modern society, Parsons’s sociology avoided the pessimistic vision of early critical theory – epitomised in Adorno’s analysis of mass society – because he looked forward to America as a ‘lead society’ in large-scale social development (see Holton and Turner, 1986).

It is also the case that, in general terms, North American sociologists did not show much interest in European sociology, especially with regard to its more critical and negative assessments of modern capitalism. Parsons, of course, translated Max Weber’s *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* and published the first English version in 1930, but he did not focus on Weber’s bleak and pessimistic view of the iron cage. He did not perceive
the figure of Nietzsche behind Weber. Subsequently, Parsons’s reception of Weber was much criticised by writers who sought to ‘de-Parsonise’ Weber. Later, in 1947, Hans Gerth and C. Wright Mills brought out *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, which showed an increased interest in Weber’s writings on the state, bureaucracy, power, and authority. Although other North American sociologists – such as Lewis Coser in his *Masters of Sociological Thought* (1971) – were appreciative of the European legacy, most North American sociologists looked to their own traditions, in particular to the Chicago School, pragmatism, and symbolic interactionism. Their ‘founding fathers’ were Mead, Park, and Thomas, rather than Marx, Weber, and Durkheim.

This gap between a critical-pessimistic Western European sociology and a progressive-optimistic North American sociology persists to a significant extent today. To take one example, Jeffrey C. Alexander has been at the forefront of the study of the European tradition, but his recent work *The Civil Sphere* (2006) has a characteristic positive conclusion based on the view that various social movements in North American history – notably the women’s movement and the civil rights movement – as well as the incorporation of the Jewish community into North American public life testify to the success, flexibility, and robustness of political liberalism in general and American liberalism in particular. There has been a long tradition of critical writing in North American sociology; yet, naturally enough, its focus has been on migration and immigrants, the ‘racial’ divide, the civil rights movement, and US imperialism in Latin America. By contrast, in European sociology after the mid-twentieth century, the Left was preoccupied with both empirical and conceptual problems that emerged from the legacy of Marxism, such as social class and class consciousness, the role of the state in capitalism, and the role of ideology in class societies – to mention only a few. While 1968 had an impact on both sides of the Atlantic, its meaning in the European context was somewhat different (Sica and Turner, 2005). As shall be explained in the chapter on Pierre Bourdieu’s treatment of religion, one clear difference between Western European and North American sociology can be described as follows: whereas Western European sociologists – such as the British sociologist Bryan Wilson – mapped the steady decline of religion in the modern world in the secularisation thesis, North American sociologists were inclined to record the resilience of religion and its essential contribution to the North American way of life, as in the works of Talcott Parsons, Will Herberg, Liston Pope, and Gerhard E. Lenski.

Across the Atlantic, although Britain had emerged successfully from the Second World War, European Anglophone sociology was not especially optimistic or triumphant. The British Empire, which had been in decline since the end of the Victorian period, was finally pulled apart by the war effort, and even the Commonwealth survived only as a fragile reminder of the past. Under
the guidance of Harold Macmillan, Britain began to abandon its imperial relationship with its colonies and accepted Macmillan’s view of ‘the wind of change blowing through the [African] continent’, expressed in his famous speech of 1963. Mainstream British sociology was realistic and reformist, rather than optimistic and utopian. In fact, it could be regarded as the parallel of Keynesian economics in focusing on issues around social insurance. Once more, Macmillan had perhaps been prescient in recognising the dawn of modern consumerism in his 1959 election campaign slogan: ‘Most of our people have never had it so good’. This mood of gradual reconstruction was captured in sociology by key figures such as Thomas H. Marshall and Richard M. Titmuss, who wrote influential works on social citizenship and welfare reform. Their influence was originally confined to Britain, where the LSE was the dominant institution in the social sciences. Other influential figures within this reformist framework were Michael Young and Peter Willmott, who published their famous investigations of family life in the London East End in the 1950s.

British social science had been blessed by a wave of migrant intellectuals in the twentieth century, particularly by the Jewish refugees who arrived in the 1930s and later, such as Ilya Neustadt and Norbert Elias, both of whom played a major role in creating what became the famous ‘Leicester School’ (Rojek, 2004). In political philosophy, the dominant figure was Isaiah Berlin, who was fundamentally critical of Marxism and distrustful of sociology, and indeed of any theory that promoted the idea of historical determinism or of the causal priority of ‘society’ over the ‘individual’. By the late 1960s, other émigrés became influential, especially John Rex, who developed conflict theory along Weberian lines, and Ralf Dahrendorf, who combined Weber and Marx in his famous *Class and Class Conflict in Industrial Society* (1959). Both thinkers were deeply critical of Parsons and more generally of North American sociology. Rex’s *Key Problems in Sociological Theory* (1961), which contained an important criticism of functionalism, became a basic textbook of undergraduate British sociology. Other critical assessments were delivered by Tom Bottomore (1965) in *Classes in Modern Society* and by David Lockwood (1964) in his article ‘Social Integration and System Integration’ and, much later, in his book *Solidarity and Schism* (1992). British sociology in the 1960s came to be identified with various radical movements, such as the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) and the anti-Apartheid campaign. This political mood of criticism and activism was reflected in Alan Dawe’s powerful article ‘The Two Sociologies’, which was published in the *British Journal of Sociology* in 1970 and in which he argued that Parsons’s systems theory ruled out agency and was based on a conservative conception of society. With the principal exception of Roland Robertson, few British sociologists were receptive to North American sociology in general and to Parsonian sociology in particular.