

On the very idea of symbolic capital? Clarifying an anthropologist's objection

Author: Terence Rajivan Edward

Abstract. Pierre Bourdieu's social theory relies on concepts of four kinds of capital: economic, social, cultural, and symbolic. The anthropologist Pnina Werbner raises the issue of whether the concept of symbolic capital faces a paradox, because within some social groups one can only gain such capital by denying its value. There is a question of how best to clarify the paradox and I offer a clarification.

Introduction. The French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu distinguishes between four different kinds of capital. Here are some very preliminary statements of what these are. There is of course economic capital: financial resources and property (McDonald 2021). There is also social capital: one's network of connections. For example, if you are stuck regarding a problem and need to ask someone, do you have anyone in your social network with the skills to help you out? There is cultural capital. That is roughly stylistic know-how. Can you converse or write, or walk even, in a certain style? In some careers, or social systems, such stylistic skills are a great advantage even if it is not part of the official requirements to have them. And there is symbolic capital: one's status in a hierarchy.¹ For example, this person is a lecturer, this other person is a senior lecturer, and then there is the professor.

Should the word "capital" actually be used for these four things? And what is

¹ The anthropologist I discuss would not be happy with this way of introducing symbolic capital, but how to spell out the discontent (1990: 309)? Here is an effort. Influential individuals in some communities rank whole communities in a hierarchy, so whole communities can have symbolic capital, not just individuals; and communities without internal hierarchies are ranked higher; so individuals who pursue symbolic capital for their community as a whole must reject the pursuit of symbolic capital as introduced above – pursuing individual rank within their community – but they are still pursuing symbolic capital.

the use of these concepts? Not everyone is convinced of their usefulness. The aims of this paper are twofold: to draw attention to a problem that has been raised for one of these concepts, a problem which is probably little known; and also to clarify the problem. The tasks are pursued in that order!

The paradox. The anthropologist Pnina Werbner targets one of these capital concepts, namely the concept of symbolic capital. She did fieldwork amongst British Pakistanis in Manchester and describes the value that they, or some of them, attach to being a worker for the public good, rather than for status within a career hierarchy. She claims that the notion of symbolic capital is bound up with a paradox:

This paradox makes Bourdieu's notion of 'symbolic capital' inherently problematic. Leaders can gain symbolic capital only by denying its existence. (1990: 310)

I too sense that there is some paradox here, but how does one clarify it?

Clarification. Perhaps there are multiple interpretations; it is hard to say.² Here is one, which detaches somewhat from the details of the ethnography (as seems inevitable, because the problem posed for Bourdieu can arise in various societies and because fewer details are needed for a clarification). The paradox involves these three commitments:

- (1) People who deny the value of social hierarchies and claim to be motivated by the communal good are best modelled by anthropologists as players in a social game, in which a reward for convincingly denying this value is improved

² I wonder whether there is some other one than the one I present.

status within a hierarchy (symbolic capital).

- (2) Some of these people are given this status by others studied because they transcend hierarchical values – they are given the status of leaders at least partly because they are regarded as motivated by the communal good, not a desire for status for themselves.
- (3) There is no reason to think that the anthropologist, with their model, understands this situation better than the people involved.

It seems to me that Bourdieu is going to reject a certain way of fleshing out exactly what is involved with (1). He will reject a representation of these denials as usually made after conscious calculations in response to rule systems, for example after reasoning as follows: “I desire to be a community leader; the rule for achieving that status requires denying the value of symbolic capital; and so I am going to do that.” Bourdieu instead emphasizes practical know-how, and an embodied feel for the game developed through experience.³ Perhaps I do not fully understand the roles that reference to these things has for Bourdieu, but I cannot see that this emphasis will itself rid us of (1). It will introduce a more complicated model, which is not obviously of value for an initial clarification of the paradox.

Anyway, here is the paradox. If you model certain people in accordance with (1), you should not be giving them the status of being leaders because, or partly because, they “transcend” hierarchical values in favour of the communal good. Granting (1), that is not a realistic reason, even if it is one’s official reason.⁴ From the

³ The crude depiction of Bourdieu is he rejects an approach based on conscious calculation. But this is Jacques Bouveresse’s slightly subtler exposition: “In most cases, what Bourdieu terms “practical sense” (*le sens pratique*) or the feel for the game (*le sens du jeu*) is in fact something that is added on later to a “theoretical knowledge” of the rules, if in fact there are any, and can only be acquired by the practice of the game.” (1999: 52) (“Sense” versus “feel” in English: I sense a paradox here; I feel it.)

⁴ Or does not seem a good reason. A lot turns on what a model is here, which seems ambiguous in much the way that rule is according to Bourdieu (Bouveresse 1999: 46). A Bourdieusian model is

anthropologist's perspective, the people claiming hierarchy-transcendence are players in a game, metaphorically speaking, and this is simply a good move for them. But the anthropologist finds that some people they study do give these players this status for this reason – that is captured by (2). So the anthropologist is going to have to claim that the people doing so are making a mistake: they don't understand the situation. But that conflicts with (3). A paradoxical combination of propositions, or at least puzzling if paradoxical is too strong a word here.

Some solutions. There are different solutions to this paradox, and I briefly sketch three. We could get rid of (1), but taking that option looks to be a problem for Bourdieu. Another solution is that awarding higher status is itself a self-interested move by fellow players in this social game and is generally not for the reason identified in (2), whatever the awarders may say in more public contexts, e.g. one actually awards the status to some individuals to alleviate the stress of being a leader oneself. Yet another solution is to claim that the anthropologist knows better, or knows better in some respect, contrary to (3): “Yes, these community leaders are given status because others believe they have transcended hierarchical values, but these leaders are actually motivated by the desire for individual status.” Note that Bourdieu's sociology incorporates attributing widespread error to participants in a social system under study (Strathern 1988: 304).

Appendix A: clarification and trade

In this paper, I have attempted to clarify Werbner's claim of a paradox. It is

meant to be realistic, though his use of “game” invites assimilation to economic models.

“natural” for a philosopher who can do this work to have a worry. The anthropologist did the fieldwork that prompted them to realize the paradox, or puzzle, or basic idea of one (or embryo of one). So what credit goes to the person who does the clarificatory work? That person ensures that your paradox idea passes “quality control tests,” but they are probably regarded as a very replaceable worker for a number of people (the average person looking in, the average academic looking in, and probably the average anthropologist coming into interaction with philosophers: “She did the fieldwork, she had the idea, you tidied it up”). There is very little incentive then for suitably skilled philosophers to do this work.

There is a further point worth keeping in mind. Werbner’s book may seem a model of clarity, whereas an anthropologist I regularly clarify seems often obscure. I experience the contrast as well. But from the point of view of philosophy, or at least a specific tradition of philosophy, key material of interest is merely suggestive and not a significant improvement on the more obscure anthropologist. If Werbner generally wrote obscurely and put that stuff in italics, I assume I would write the same paper. But there are probably gains for other disciplines with her level of clarity, such as for reading through the whole book rather than just picking highlighted material.

Appendix B: literature reviews please?

Philosopher Lucy McDonald has a useful article with information about Bourdieu, which I rely on for introducing some concepts of his. I guess it was intended to have value as a source of information but strangely it omits the concept of symbolic capital, when discussing concepts of capital from Bourdieu. That is not just

a problematic omission for conveying his social theories,⁵ but also because this is an area of philosophy-anthropology interaction regarding Bourdieu's theory. What do we make of status systems where the highest status is achieved, partly or wholly, by denying the value of the status system? It is a question for anthropologists and philosophers evaluating Bourdieu; but I would not blame McDonald for being unaware of this significance. However, there is a great need for literature reviews, because there are little-known criticisms that merit attention, by less famous figures. But it is quite a demanding task, without much rewards – it is not the glamorous side of research.

References

- Bouveresse, J. 1999. Rules, Dispositions, and the Habitus. In Shusterman, R. (ed.), *Bourdieu: A Critical Reader*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- McDonald, L. 2021. Please Like This Paper. *Philosophy* 96: 335-358.
- Strathern, M. 1988. *The gender of the gift: problems with women and problems with society in Melanesia*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Werbner, P. 1990. *The Migration Process: Capital, Gifts and Offerings among British Pakistanis*. New York: Berg.

⁵ “She left out symbolic capital.” “Why did she do that?” “How could she cut that?” Etc.