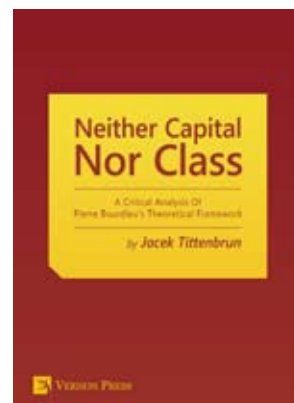


NEW BOOKS

Grażyna Musiał

Is the Social Capital Really Social? Deliberations on Jacek Tittenbrun's “Neither Capital nor Class”



Book Review: Tittenbrun J. (2017) *Neither Capital nor Class: A Critical Analysis of Pierre Bourdieu's Theoretical Framework*, Wilmington, Delaware: Vernon Press, 359 p.



MUSIAŁ, Grażyna—
Head of Independent
School of Theory
and Methodology of
Economics at University
of Economics in
Katowice. Address: 50
May 1st St., Katowice 40-
287, Poland.

Email: grazyna.musial@ue.katowice.pl

Abstract

Jacek Tittenbrun, a sociologist specializing in the sociology of economy, authored the book *Neither Capital nor Class: A Critical Analysis of Pierre Bourdieu's Theoretical Framework*, for sociologists, economists, and researchers of other social disciplines (e.g., law, cultural studies, anthropology). In the book, written in the convention of critical realism methodology, Tittenbrun presents the scientific achievements of the well-known French sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu, an author who deals particularly with the concept of capital and capital issues. The French sociologist, who sometimes obscures the notion of capital and identifies opposing ownership relationships, is not attached to this book's contributors, whose theses are expressed clearly.

Tittenbrun sets a goal in this book to describe and explain the phenomena of capital and social classes. The research task formulated by Tittenbrun consisted of confronting those discovered in Bourdieu's regularity, along with his construction of capital as an idea and selected, significant ideas about capital, proclaimed in modern science, mainly by Anglo-Americans. Tittenbrun acquaints readers with a wide and valuable spectrum of views, such as those of Gary Stanley Becker, Kenneth Joseph Arrow, Robert Merton Solow, and others.

Tittenbrun makes no reference to the outstanding Russian sociologists who have chronicled the extensive achievements of Bourdieu, but the book is worth reading.

Keywords: Pierre Bourdieu; Gary Stanley Becker; Robert Merton Solow; sociology; forms of capital; property as a category; human capital; social diversification; workforce; economic imperialism.

The present book of Jacek Tittenbrun,¹ *Neither Capital nor Class: A Critical Analysis of Pierre Bourdieu's Theoretical Framework*, contains chapter 1: The Discrete Charm of “Capital” or the Pitfalls of Hierarchy; chapter 2: French Structuralism or the Problem of Formalism, chapter 3: Economic Imperialism in the Eyes of Economists; chapter 4: “Capital” and “Class”; chapter 5: Public Sociol-

¹ Jacek Tittenbrun, Ordinary Professor, Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań, Poland.

ogy; chapter 6: Solidarity—the Core of European Community; and a preface, conclusion, references, index, and information about the author.

Pierre-Félix Bourdieu (1930–2002) is commonly regarded as one of the most significant social thinkers of the twentieth century. It is no wonder that his views are the subject of study in leading scientific centers and the object of careful analysis. Bourdieu's construction of capital as a characteristic in sociology was presented by Vadim Radaev. The scholar treats the concept of capital as a political and economic category [Radaev 2002].

This new book by the renowned Polish scientist, Jacek Tittenbrun, may be of interest to the researchers of economic sociology. Tittenbrun's work is an in-depth, multi-pronged inquiry into the conceptual framework, of which many constituents have reached a broad and interdisciplinary currency. It is fair to say that the central axis around which the entire theoretical edifice built up by Bourdieu is constituted and was organized by his notion of capital or, more precisely, various forms of capital, among which social and cultural capital are perhaps the most salient concepts. Meanwhile, Tittenbrun demonstrates compellingly that those and other, similar concepts are in fact misnomers or, to put it bluntly, abortive metaphors, which—both individually and collectively—cannot but be considered as a manifestation of economic imperialism or colonialism. The capital category is, after all, an economic notion.

Paradoxically, while Bourdieu criticizes Gary Stanley Becker's (1930–2014, Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences, 1992) theory of human capital for its economism and reductionism, he fails to see that the same criticisms could be levelled against his own approach, extending as it does an economic conceptual framework to a diverse range of social processes and phenomena. The Bourdieu approach is all the more evident when the French scholar maintains that all those non-economic forms of capital can be—in the last analysis, to be sure—brought down to the base economic capital. This suggests that the aforementioned position of Bourdieu draws in fact on the theory of base and superstructure, ascribed by many to Marxism, which has been attacked as an exemplar of economic determinism. Meanwhile, this oft-heard criticism is far off the mark; at the very best, it applies to some variants of a simplified historical materialism.

As to Bourdieu's position, which—as noted above—could be regarded as a distant echo of the said crude conception, it attracts criticism also owing to the very concept of economic capital, whose cognitive utility is bound to be rather limited, as it is defined by Bourdieu as simply the “command over economic resources (cash, assets).” The reader may research and find that there is indeed far more food for thought to a range of definitions of the term in question offered by economic theory. Indeed, Tittenbrun devotes an entire chapter to such an overview that includes a plethora of Austrian, heterodox, and neoclassical positions. The chapter is by no means purely descriptive in character, as there is a definite theoretical angle from which this exploration is being conducted. The author sets out to determine to what extent given definitions take consideration of social factors and, relatedly, how their relationship to the concept of economic ownership could be understood. The latter, conceived of as rent, constitutes one of the principal research tools used by the author throughout his study. Albeit, at first glance, the term that describes the substance of the aforementioned concept appears to be identical to that of “economic rent” used in mainstream economics, the author takes great pains to illuminate a range of important differences between the latter and his own notion of socio-economic ownership.

The critique to which the analytical framework developed by the author of *Distinction* is subject in the book under review goes even further. For instance, the author of the latter shows that the concept of social capital is a kind of double misnomer, as the adjunct term “social” captures in this instance only one type of direct, interpersonal relations, leaving out the sphere of indirect social relations whose impact on the life chances of individuals, to use Max Weber's phrase, cannot be overestimated—quite independently of whether they are reflected in the respective individual's consciousness or not.

Another fruitful analytical thread pursued by the author consists of linking Bourdieu's thought to that of a broader, intellectual current-structuralism, especially as conceived of by Claude Levi-Strauss and Louis Althusser. That juxtaposition brings out, *inter alia*, such key features of Bourdieu's approach as essentialism and formalism, which allows the author to frame the former in terms of epistemic idealism. Paradoxically enough, one can charge the French thinker's approach not only with idealism (also in the form of culturalism) but also crude materialism, showing up as physicalism.

Another part of the book that should be of interest to readers reveals that, counter-intuitively, many respected practitioners of the discipline do not approve of this kind of over-inclusiveness accorded to the concepts that are part and parcel of economics, the procedures for which lead to confusion rather than to any cognitively productive results. Amongst others, Kenneth Joseph Arrow (1921–2017, Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences, 1972) and Robert Merton Solow (born 1924, Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences, 1987), have expressed their utmost skepticism toward this fad, whose Pierre Bourdieu is the most prolific exponent. Both thinkers, as well as other critics, point out that most (if not all) of the new non-economic concepts of capital lack some fundamental attributes of capital, such as alienability, measurability, and so on.

It is easy to understand why the above account, centering as it does on those threads of the reviewed work that appear to be most closely related to the field of economics, has revolved so far around only one of the two terms featured in the book's title; however, this does not mean that the second of those title concepts is irrelevant for the purposes of analytical approach. On the contrary, the notion of class and its ramifications, which figures prominently in this book, is extremely topical given the current interest in the issues of socio-economic inequalities. And in considering such issues, both analytical rigor and conceptual precision are necessary if the results of those investigations are to possess any theoretical and practical validity. Therefore, the distinction between two alternative perspectives on social differentiation, the necessity of which the author repeatedly points out, is pertinent in that context. Specifically, the Bourdieusian class theory has more in common with social stratification. The issue at stake is not just a terminological one; according to the author, standard models and scales of social stratification are characterized by a number of specific features irreconcilable with class theory as understood in the writings of the founding fathers of a given field of inquiry, Karl Marx and Max Weber. Most importantly, in the present context, it is only social classes that are necessarily rooted in the economy, while the units of social stratification may comprise individuals from all walks of life. Furthermore, while social stratification is inherently hierarchical, it is only in extreme cases that class structures can be brought down to such a ladder-like model.

The reviewed book goes against the grain of conventional academic wisdom, tackling head on the majority opinion that takes for granted the cognitive value of key Bourdieusian concepts. The critique of the latter presented in the book is well argued and meticulously documented. It is also fair in that the author often gives Bourdieu the benefit of the doubt and draws the reader's attention to some specific merits pertaining, in his view, to Bourdieu's approach. This applies, *inter alia*, to the flagship theory of cultural and social reproduction. While it would certainly benefit by a more dialectical point of view, Bourdieu at the same time reveals how the system of education—contrary to the prevailing ideology—preserves the social position of the privileged groups in society. The economist may in that context note that the Bourdieusian critique of human capital theory is in fact rather superficial, and from the standpoint of the former, it would be more useful if Bourdieu engaged in a more direct and extensive polemic with Becker. The author of the book under review would suggest that it is Bourdieu's conceptual apparatus that stands in the way of such an in-depth analysis, pointing to the concept of labor power that hides behind the notion of human capital.

It is also noteworthy that the author attempts to explain the growing presence of economic concepts in other social sciences to which Bourdieu's theory of capital forms has made a key contribution. The explanation is interesting insofar as it moves beyond the realm of ideas and into their real-world background. The author

argues, namely, that the trend could be conceived of as a reflection of a set of processes going on in the social world, such as privatization, commodification, and other similar processes comprising the present-day expansion of (real, *economic*) capital. Arguably, we are living in a time when it is frequently assumed that the logic of capital has subsumed every single aspect of our lives, intervening in the organization of even our intimate relations as well as the control of our time and prospects (e.g., via debt).

Finally, it should be made clear that the author's cogent rebuttal to the proliferation of the notion of capital across the various social sciences does not mean that he resists any rapprochement between the latter and economics. On the contrary, his theoretical framework—termed socio-economic structuralism—is posited on the premise according to which to provide a cognitively valuable account and/or explanation of the social phenomenon/a under study, the researcher must first determine the relationship of the latter to the economic structure. This epistemic directive gives justice to the paramount role that the economy plays in human societies, at the same time not implying any kind of economic reductionism.

The associated commitment to interdisciplinarity is to be welcomed, if only because its distinction from economics imperialism is manifestly clear. Referring to the above usage, as a final word, by way of clarification, the term “economics imperialism” could be proposed because of an intrinsic ambiguity marking the term most widely used in the context concerned: “economic imperialism.” The point is that the latter expression denotes both the imperialism of the discipline of economics in the academic domain and the economy-driven imperialism in the global economy and international relations. Thus, to avoid any misunderstanding, the two respective terms should be, in my view, kept distinct. This terminological distinction, if accepted, does not detract from the value of the very concept under consideration, which as amply documented in Tittenbrun's book, is not as much a critique of economic sociology as some practitioners of the social sciences and their ill-considered attempts at developing what Leon Petrażycki (1867–1931) would call “leaping concepts.”

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