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ARTICLE



## The use of 'cultural capital' in sociology of education in Sweden

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### ABSTRACT

We seek to consider the use of Pierre Bourdieu's 'cultural capital' within Swedish sociology of education focusing on the adoption of the term and asking how the 'cultural capital' is related to the specific context in Sweden. Here we consider the historical context and disciplinary route through which the concept travelled. The Swedish educational system promoted the ideal of meritocracy: everyone had an equal chance to access education, which in turn should facilitate social mobility. Even if the economic barriers to accessing education had been removed and higher education was available, social equality had not been achieved. The concept of cultural capital allowed for precise analyses of social groups' use of the education system. The studies were able to show that the meritocratic ideal also concealed an inequality, where the school's embrace of culture was something different from, and more than, what the teaching was supposed to convey.

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Before importing any concept from social theory into research, one should question the concept's relevance to the area, field or national context in which it is to be applied. How is a concept to be interpreted, made relevant and then applied? To what extent does its usage need to relate tightly to its origin? We seek to consider these questions in relation to our use of a sociological concept – Pierre Bourdieu's 'cultural capital' – within Swedish sociology of education research.<sup>1</sup>

Initially, a brief historical overview of Swedish scholarship within sociology. During the late 1960 s and the beginning of 1970 s, left-wing radical political engagement was found to shape academic contributions, in part as a more diverse group of scholars entered the academy with the expansion of the higher education system (Ekelund, 2017). Continental researchers such as Jürgen Habermas, Christian Baudelot & Roger Establet, Pierre Bourdieu & Jean-Claude Passeron, and from England Basil Bernstein and Paul Willis, had a strong impact in shaping the positions taken in these socially critical

research environments. Following these theorists, the school was constructed by Swedish thinkers as a conservative institution. Yet, the Swedish welfare state, with its long-lasting governance by the Social Democrats, saw the investment in educational reforms as a way of creating a more equal society. In what follows, we consider how Bourdieu and Passeron's work facilitated Swedish researchers to understand why the investment and expansion of education did not have the intended effects. Central to Swedish sociology of education was the understanding put forth in Bourdieu & Passeron's book 'The Heirs', that 'culture' was a key mechanism through which social reproduction took place (P. Bourdieu & Passeron, 1964).

None of Bourdieu's other concepts have gained greater traction than that of cultural capital (Sapiro, 2015). It is used across various contexts, ranging from sociology to the media, but as researchers within the discipline of sociology of education, for this *Research in Translation*, we focus on discussing the adoption of the term in the local academic field, asking how 'cultural capital' is related to the specific context of the country, and why it has proven to be such a generative and accepted term by those scholars working in this space.

When analysing the introduction and spread of a concept into a new space – in this case, that of cultural capital in Sweden – we need to consider the historical context and disciplinary route through which the concept travelled. It is now almost 50 years since Bourdieu's sociology was introduced in Sweden, mainly *via* sociology, which in itself is hardly surprising, although several of Bourdieu's works are important in disciplines such as anthropology (P. Bourdieu & Sayad, 1964), ethnology (Bourdieu, 1979) and linguistics (Bourdieu, 1982). In Sweden the focus of his sociology was most notably taken up within the sociology of education; it is also here that the concept of cultural capital took up a central position within the scholarship (Broady & Palme, 1993; Callewaert & Nilsson, 1977). In the early 1970 s, a series of books were published with titles like 'School and Society' (Callewaert & Nilsson, 1977) and 'Equality Myth and Class Mastery' (Lundberg, 1976). These titles had a strong impact on sociology and in shaping school pedagogy, as well as being drawn on within teacher education programmes. Donald Broady became central to the establishment of a critical educational sociology within the academy based on Bourdieu's sociology.

Broady, together with colleagues, built up the research group Sociology of Education and Culture (SEC), whose name was inspired by Bourdieu's research group (Centre de sociologie de l'éducation et de la culture), and which shed light on the relationships between education and culture. (Today the SEC has its main center at Uppsala University). Through the contacts and research collaborations with Bourdieu and his associates, and later his successors, the SEC has maintained a close relationship with the French Bourdieusian tradition.

In 1990 Broady defended his thesis *Sociology and Epistemology. On Pierre Bourdieu's work and the historical epistemology* (Broady, 1990). This is a comprehensive piece of work that analyses the roots of Bourdieu's sociology in the tradition of Durkheimian and the historical epistemology within French philosophy of science (Gaston Bachelard, Georges Canguilhem, et al.). Critically, the thesis also examined relations between these strands and the mathematical tradition founded by Jean-Paul Benzécri, known today as Geometric Data Analysis (GDA). Further, Broady gave an in-depth account of the uses of the key concepts 'habitus', 'capital' and 'field', and of how these concepts initially grew out of problems that Bourdieu and his collaborators encountered in their research practice.

The interest in Bourdieu's sociology in Sweden stemmed largely from Broady's work, where he discouraged an unreflective 'adoption' of Bourdieu's concepts.

Guinness's porter is said to taste worse as soon as it is sipped outside Ireland's borders. But this does not apply to Bourdieu's concepts (those who claim that Bourdieu's sociology is too "French" to be used in a country like Sweden forget that it evolved from studies of even more different societies, including traditional peasant societies). However, there are differences between France and Sweden that may require modification of his methods, in order to investigate corresponding fields or forms of capital. (Broady, 1990, pp. 302-303)

Broady emphasised in his work that there is probably not such a general appreciation of a dominant and legitimate national Swedish culture as there is in France. In Sweden, there have been alternative avenues for social mobility through, for example, folk high schools [folkhögskolor] and involvement in political youth associations, student organisations and trade union assignments. Such alternative routes to the field of power do not exist in France where cultural capital is accumulated and further refined at specific elite schools (Bourdieu, 1989; Broady, 1990). For this reason, we would suggest the impact Broady's dissertation had in Sweden focused more on the possible application of Bourdieu's concept to empirical studies, rather than a strong engagement in the further theoretical development of his work.

In what follows we wish to continue to reflect on the specific conditions that made the take-up and the specific use of the concept of 'cultural capital' possible within Sweden beyond Broady's introduction of his work. This is not an in-depth comparison between the two national contexts of Sweden and France, but an analysis of the particular circumstances that have been favorable to the introduction and use of the concept in Sweden.

The historical context in which an application of Bourdieusian concepts became fruitful begun after the significant shifts in the education system which occurred during the so-called 'record years' (from the war to the energy crisis in the 1970s). Sweden's educational system, both schools and higher

education, were extended and broadened in this post-war period. Groups that had previously been excluded were now granted access to education. In Sweden, the economy flourished and a generous student loan system was created to remove the financial barriers to these so-called 'new groups' seeking to secure higher levels of education. A system of municipal-provided adult education was also introduced for older students, to compensate for their previously poor school education. The massive educational expansion occurred during the 1960s and '1970s. The number of students in higher education increased from 37,000 to 120,000 during this period, a tripling in 10 years (Börjesson, 2011). This massive expansion of students, together with expectations of reforms in the name of equality, however, created pressures on both the educational system and on the labour market. The universities were expected to deliver high-quality education, and the labour market had hopes of offering positions that matched the investment in education. Research studies focusing on quantifying and evaluating the outcomes of these reforms. To help in this endeavor, researchers found Bourdieu's work, and particularly his concept of cultural capital, very generative. Scholars were trying to make sense of why, once the economic barriers to accessing education had been removed and higher education was now available across a wider geographical area, social equality had not been achieved. The Swedish system promoted the ideal of meritocracy: everyone had an equal chance to access education, which in turn should facilitate social mobility, at least based on educational attainment. However, the research found that inequality continued to exist. The concept of cultural capital allowed for a finely calibrated and precise analyses of social groups' use of the education system. Cultural distinctions, taste and distaste in relation to education and culture in general, proved to be important for understanding the differentiated Swedish education system (Palme, 2008). Using the concept of 'cultural capital', the studies were able to show that the meritocratic ideal also concealed an inequality, where the school's warm embrace of culture was something different from, and more than, what the teaching was supposed to convey.

Macro-sociological changes, where the opportunity for work in industry was shrinking while the civil service sector was expanding, led to increased demands on education at secondary and degree levels. So, as the 1980s marched on, more and more students attended higher levels of education. Thus, two critical structural changes were taking place at the same time – the transition to 'white collar jobs' coming concurrently at the same time as the establishment of new universities and colleges (Hultqvist, 2018).

The differentiation of outcomes begun to be seen internally, within the education system, rather than externally. As more groups applied for higher education, the study paths chosen became increasingly important in explaining outcomes, but also how degree choices were structured. Academically oriented degrees were dominated by middle-class students when compared to vocational

ones, and certain groups of upper-middle-class children were found to be concentrated in certain schools and within certain study programmes. To make sense of these differentiations, Swedish researchers' engagement with the concept of cultural capital proved to be relevant (Lidegran, 2009; Palme, 2008). The surveys showed the importance of cultural assets or lack of these, and the way the educational system was navigated by different social groups. The studies also showed that cultural capital was highly concentrated in certain schools and programmes. This also implied a high concentration of cultural capital in the geographical space, since the most dominating schools and programmes were often located in the wealthiest neighborhoods.

With the political changes of the early 1990s, the 'free school' system was introduced. Students' free choice of school was accompanied by a so-called 'voucher scheme', which led to a radical conversion of the school system into a marketplace. Simply put, schools become rich or poor depending on student demand to take up a place there. Some schools in the central parts of the big cities attracted culturally powerful groups, while suburban schools were identified as less attractive, and so lost more successful students. The transition to a market system of schooling has, especially in the big cities, made even more visible the importance of social and cultural assets (Forsberg, 2018; Larsson & Hultqvist, 2018). The marketisation is most developed in the big cities where we find a strong concentration of resource-rich groups of students in particular schools and programmes.

At the beginning of the 2000s, the Swedish school system appeared to be increasingly fragmented and differentiated. Analyses of education trajectories showed that distinguishing social groups whose positions were primarily based on cultural capital, such as the sons and daughters of university teachers and doctors, from those who were more aligned with economic capital, such as business leaders and senior officials in the private sector, could explain differences in school choice and study programmes pursued (Börjesson et al., 2016a). Understanding these critical differentiations inspired by the French sociology led to a further turn in the research on education take-up and outcomes in Sweden – a focus on elites (Börjesson et al., 2016b; Lidegran et al., 2019; De Saint-Martin, 1993).

Research in the sociology of education that emerged in the wake of educational reforms in the 1960s in Sweden required that cultural assets, like the economic ones, should be studied more closely, to see how they became valorised and facilitated outcomes for different groups of students. A focus on families' assets of cultural capital have made it possible to understand how social differences were maintained, and continue to be so, despite, for many decades a government investment in expanding the education system to facilitate social mobility of all groups. The guiding principle for our use of the idea of cultural capital, which was developed in a different cultural context and at a different time, is to constantly re-examine the

concept in the design of our research, with reference to new societal changes, such as the formation of global elites, changes to education systems, or how assets, through migration, are transferred between countries.

In summary, based on this limited exposition of the Swedish import of the concept of cultural capital, it is interesting to note that, like the Bourdieusian tradition, the concept has been used mainly in empirical studies in educational socio-scientific research. Educational reforms in the 1960s and 1970s and later reforms in the 1990s aimed, albeit driven by different ideologies, to enable social mobility for the individual. For both of these educational reforms moments, the concept of cultural capital has proven fruitful in understanding some of the conditions not only of social reproduction, but also of social change.

## Note

1. Cultural capital can be defined as manners, practices, values and tastes that are, especially by dominant social groups, recognised as valuable, esteemed and worthwhile. This implies, for instance, a good mastery of language, substantial knowledge and appreciation of culture and an educated manner. Cultural capital is often related to educational capital, and educational degrees are understood by Bourdieu as an institutional form of cultural capital (P. Bourdieu, 1979; P. Bourdieu & Passeron, 1964, 1970; Broady, 1990)

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