

Symbolic Capital

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The concept of “symbolic capital” is the fourth general type (“specie”) of capital dealt with by Pierre Bourdieu’s sociological theory, together with cultural, economic and social capital.

Though, symbolic capital is not situated on a same plane as the other species, since it emphasises the “symbolic” dimensions of social life, which creates an asymmetric role. Bourdieu even discusses its existence as a genuine sort of capital and seems to hesitate between the use of this concept and more indirect formulations (like “the symbolic effects of (all sorts of) capital”: Bourdieu, 1997).

In one of the definitions proposed by Bourdieu during the 1980s (Bourdieu, 1987), symbolic capital is, precisely, defined by any other sort of capital when it comes to its “recognition” or its “perception” according to particular “schemes”. As Bourdieu puts it: « *symbolic capital is **nothing but**¹ economic or cultural capital as soon as they are known and recognized, when they are known according to the perception categories they impose, the symbolic strength relations tend to reproduce and reinforce the strength relations which constitute the structure of the social space* » (Bourdieu, 1987). This definition based on the concept of “categories of perception” is the most classical (Champagne, Christin, 2004).

This definition is supported by a more general conception of symbolic structures (“subjective” vs “objective”, “discursive” vs “material”...) which have been characterized, since the 1960-1970s (Pinto, 1998), by their “relative autonomy”: these structures are related to the distribution of economic, cultural and social resources, and to the distributions of specific assets in various fields. But, as they are internalized by the agents, they *distort* the perception of these resources or, more precisely, they fundamentally participate to construct and define the “exchange rates” between other types of capital (this corresponds to the more comprehensive conception, which is finally retained after some hesitation, see Champagne, Christin, 2004). Therefore, the notion of symbolic capital can neither be analyzed as an autonomous reality (which could be simply accumulated, transferred, etc.) nor as a secondary asset, which would be completely and mechanically determined by the other species. Its status remains therefore difficult to assess without examining its general theoretical implication.

¹ Underlined by us.

Genealogy of symbolic capital

In Bourdieu's work, the notion of symbolic capital "arrives" a bit later than those of economic and cultural capital (but at the same time as "social capital"), during a period marked by an attempt of theoretical generalization which begins to take place explicitly in the second half of the 1960s. This attempt, which is related to the analysis of class differentiations, domination and reproduction, will in particular lead to the major theoretical texts of 1972 (*Esquisse d'une théorie de la pratique* and "Les stratégies matrimoniales dans le système des stratégies de reproduction", in the historical journal *Annales*), in which symbolic capital is first mentioned as such.

Symbolic boundaries and distinctions, but also power and violence, are then seen as major aspects of social classes, and the notion of symbolic capital will help Bourdieu to describe these processes in a general framework, what he will call a "general theory of the economy of practices" at the end of *Esquisse (Outline)*.

The economic "analogy", which is used by Bourdieu to understand educational inequalities in terms of "cultural capital" in an attempt to construct a more general theory both inspired by and critical of economics (Lebaron, 2003), is already present in very early texts. It is even *first* mobilized in order to analyze objectively symbolic processes, without losing their specific symbolic dimension (see Bourdieu, 1994, for a later discussion of the economic dimensions of symbolic processes and the symbolic background of economic realities).

In his first book *Sociologie de l'Algérie*, published in 1958, Pierre Bourdieu develops an analysis of the differences of prestige between different Arabic-speaking tribes. He describes the reinforcement of groups as the product of a particular sort of accumulation of capital ("*a cumulative effect analogous to the one which gets capital to attract capital in another context (...). This initial capital is apparently nothing but the name and the domination it confers to the group*" (Bourdieu, 1958, p.85). This sort of capital, related to prestige and power, is reproduced through the uses of genealogy, which can be seen as a story of feats, attempting to maintain the memory of the origins of the group and create symbolic value(s) on this base. "*The name in itself constitutes a power (...). The names conserved by tradition are those of victorious fractions or the main families to whom diverse groups will ask for protection*" (Bourdieu, 1958, p.86). In this original text, what will later be called "symbolic capital" is implicitly related to *names* of families and associated to the particular *authority* of families and tribes. It is close to the idea of "power", when it is understood in terms of prestige, "honor" and "moral authority", and not of direct material or physical constraints. It is a variant of magic: "*a magical link unites the name and named object; to borrow the name is to participate to the virtues of his owner and in particular, to the "Baraka", vital force, mysterious and well-being power which favors elite men*" (Bourdieu, 1958, p. 87)².

² This magical aspect of symbolic capital will remain present until the last theoretical texts about symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1994, Bourdieu, 1997).

A few years later, in a study of the social reproduction of peasants in Bearn (Bourdieu, 1962), Bourdieu will continue to analyze family names (and even names of “houses”: “maisons”), as the expressions of the symbolic patrimony which families have to perpetuate, especially during the stake created by the necessity of alliances through marriage. In his very well-known early text about “celibacy and peasant condition”, published in 1962, the position of families is not only analyzed in economic terms, but also through the “name and renown” (“nom et renom”) of the “house” (“maison”) conserved by the “house chief” (“chef de maison”), which is at stake in the reproduction process.

Toward a general theory of the economy of practices

In another text written in 1960 about “the sense of honor” among Kabyle peasants, Bourdieu uses the notion of “symbolic profit” to analyze the “embeddedness” (and the “dissimulation”) of economic logics into considerations of prestige and honor (Bourdieu, 1972a, p. 29-60). The conceptual mix between symbolic processes and economic concepts is then made intellectually possible, if not yet completely explicit, and it will remain a central feature of Bourdieu’s sociological theory: economics and symbolic structures are thought “together”. An intermediary stage is certainly the generalization of the notion of “capital” in the study of educational inequalities, which takes place in the second half of the 1960s (for example, in the collective book by Darras, *Le partage des bénéfices* in 1966: Darras, 1966).

Not surprisingly, the notion of symbolic capital itself (defined as “prestige, honor, in brief *hurma*” in 1972) really emerges as such in anthropological texts about Algeria, and especially Kabylie: in *Esquisse d’une théorie de la pratique* (translated into English as *Outline of a theory practice*), published in French in 1972, one finds one of the first occurrences of the well-known representation of social resources based on four-species of capital, with an asymmetric role ascribed to symbolic capital, which provides their values to the others, but also dissimulates the origin of this value (which creates a logical circle). “*The symbolic capital (...) has a particular effect provided and only provided it dissimulates the fact that “material” species of capital are at its origin, and, finally, at the origin of its effects*” (Bourdieu, 1972a, p. 376).

In Bourdieu’s early text on family and kinship, included in the same book, a more systematic analysis is developed on the basis of empirical surveys realized between 1960 and 1970. Symbolic capital is defined as a capital of “honorability”, which is maintained through specific behaviors (“honor behaviors”), where one can see a particular sort of individual and collective strategy, which is not completely made conscious. It is particularly developed in a society where economic accumulation remains limited: in that traditional society, the peasants adopt these strategies, conscious or not, in order to maintain and accumulate symbolic capital, that is to defend (and promote) their familial and personal “honor” in relation to each other. Among the most interesting empirical analyses in this early anthropological text one studies, for example, the stake of first names given to children inside families, where a way to reproduce the group is to give a child the name of his (or her) grand-father (or mother),

or any other particular member of the family, imbued with a specific reputation. The practice of genealogies, again, reveals stakes around the transmission of *magical* characteristics related to first names.

At the same period, Bourdieu's analysis of marriages in a Bearn small area during the turn of the 1960s (the survey is realized in 1959-1960) - is centered on the reproduction of economic and symbolic capital among peasant families (Bourdieu, 1962). The analysis goes on during the 1960s and the formula "maximization of economic and symbolic capital" is used in the second article based on this fieldwork, the famous article of 1972 ("Les stratégies matrimoniales dans le système des stratégies de reproduction", Bourdieu, 1972b) in order to describe strategies aiming at maintaining both the level of patrimony and some more "perceptual" and even "undefined", "fuzzy" though highly relevant aspects of their social identity, like the "honor" surrounding the name of the family, which objectifies its relative position in the social structure of the peasant world.

What is striking here is the link between the notion of "symbolic capital" and the systematic introduction of *strategies* in Bourdieu's analysis. Strategies are not purely economic, but they are also largely symbolic, in the sense that their aim is maintaining a certain "reputation" and "honorability", and not only to increase wealth or material profits, even if this second dimension is always present to some extent. Among the synonymous then used by Bourdieu to define symbolic capital is the notion of "collectively recognized credit" (Bourdieu, 1972a, p.121), which is first the expression of the "importance" attributed to a person by symbolic construction processes, but which also shows the way Bourdieu tries to think out the symbolic "embeddedness" of economic notions, and to connect them to more fundamental mechanisms.

Much later, in his theoretical masterpiece *Méditations pascaliennes*, Bourdieu generalizes the notion of "symbolic capital" to an "existential" theory inspired by Pascal: being *important* for others, then for oneself, is related to the fact of "being occupied, projected towards aims", etc. Symbolic capital, defined as "recognition" and "consideration", appears as the basis of social existence, as an existence "for the others". *"Of the distributions, one of the most unequal, and the most cruel, is the distribution of symbolic capital, that is social importance, and reasons to exist"* (Bourdieu, 1997, p. 284). Institution rituals, inside the family and more generally (nomination, ordination, etc.), are interpreted as ways to organize socially this distribution, reproduce and transfer symbolic capital.

Empirical analyses of symbolic capital mechanisms

Empirical analyses of the particular function of symbolic capital are, after the main example of familial strategies, very present in the study of elite groups, and of particular fields, which are developed after the beginning of the 1970s (for a synthesis, Bourdieu, 1989).

Writers in the literary field (Sapiro, 1999, Poliak, 2006), intellectuals (Charle, 1990), philosophers (Pinto, 1986), academics (Bourdieu, 1984), company leaders (Bourdieu, de Saint-Martin, 1978) but also institutions like elite schools (“grandes écoles”, Bourdieu, 1989) or companies (Bourdieu, 1999) concentrate various forms of specific “reputation” and are structured around symbolic stakes. These forms of “reputation” define sorts of symbolic capital, reproduced through particular strategies inside the fields.

The notion of field, which appears in 1966 but is formalized in 1971, gives a large extension to the concept of capital, and in particular to symbolic capital. Each field is even *defined* by a particular sort of capital at stake: literary, scientific, political, etc. This necessarily implies a specific type of symbolic capital, which is the “perceived” manifestation of the specific assets prevailing in the field, and the way they are socially “valued”. For example, in fields of “cultural production” (like the literary, artistic or scientific fields), symbolic goods are at stake and the accumulation of symbolic capital by agents of the field is related to the production of these goods (“work”, “scientific articles” or “results”) and to the complex way their “quality” is assessed. To accumulate specific symbolic capital in these fields means nothing but acting in conformity with the rules of the field, in order to conquer specific recognition.

In the scientific field (Bourdieu, 1975), the reputation (i.e. the specific sort of symbolic capital) which prevails is based on the accumulation of a particular type of “credit”, closely related to the perception of the “validity” and the “importance” of “discoveries”, “theories”, “results”, etc. An expression of this phenomenon is the gift by the “scientific community” of a personal name to a particular scientific “effect” or “object”, like the “Fermat theorem”. Each field is the place of particular capital accumulation and, consecutively, of complex symbolic capital construction processes.

One of the most well-known direct applications of the notion concerns the political field (Bourdieu, 1982): it is, for example, the interpretation of the existence of “spokesmen” in the political practice and of the mechanisms of political power. Politics is centered on discourse and legitimacy, then on symbolic capital (and social capital). The accumulation of symbolic capital is intrinsically related to the concentration of power: the King, for example, has conquered the “sceptre”, which allows him to speak for the entire group and producing legitimate discourses (Bourdieu, 1982). This analysis is developed and systematized when Bourdieu analyses the historical process of state-formation as the product of a “concentration of symbolic capital” (Bourdieu, 1994).

It is logical that the notion of symbolic capital is extensively used by Monique de Saint-Martin, a close collaborator of Bourdieu during the period 1960-1980, when she studies the reproduction and changes of a particular social group: aristocracy (Saint-Martin, 1992). Names are, historically, a central stake in the French nobility, as they express the symbolic capital of a long-lasting, deeply rooted and closed social group: the oldest a family the highest its collective symbolic capital. The “particle” (in French “de”) in itself expresses an aristocratic origin and relates symbolic capital to names in a very concrete manner. First names also concentrate some symbolic capital, in the sense that they also relate to the history of the family and its particularly well-known members. Such types

of analysis can easily be extended to the “grande bourgeoisie” (Pinçon, Pinçon-Charlot, 2000).

The study of intellectuals also reveals the importance of symbolic capital accumulation in a more political (or “external” to the field) sense: to have become “a name” (in French “s’être fait un nom”) is the precondition for acting with moral or political authority as an “intellectual” (see Charle, 1990). Analyses of the magical authority of “economics Nobel laureates” also relate it to the accumulation of a very particular sort of symbolic capital, based on the combination of science and economic expertise. This sort of symbolic capital has overcome the domination of religious legitimacy, another traditional major source of symbolic capital, in modern societies. Economists are the owners of high levels of symbolic capital, which make them central in public policies and public debates and decisions (Lebaron, 2006).

“Negative” symbolic capital

Processes of “discrimination” and “stigmatization”, well documented in the literature of the social sciences especially after Goffman (Goffman, 1963) can be reinterpreted in terms of symbolic capital: any particular physical or “symbolic” property (physical aspect, skin color, linguistic practice, religious habits, etc.) can be negatively valued in certain societies or groups. This shows the fact that symbolic capital can be either positive (and result in a kind of “attraction”, concretely defined as “recognition”, “care”, “love”, etc.) or negative (a “repulsion”, perceived as various forms of “racism”, “rejection”, “hostility”, “discrimination”, etc.). As nobody is entirely and uniformly characterized by a positive or a negative symbolic capital, the amount of symbolic capital of an individual or a group can be described as a social combination of attractive and repulsive dimensions of this individual, group, etc.

In the Indian society (and the Hindu religion), the division into casts (“system of casts”) recalls the existence of very subtle and complex stratifications of symbolic capital based on a religious conception of purity. At the lower level, the “Dalits” are defined by their exclusion from the rest of the society, “repulsive” for the other casts (for a recent illustration of this negative symbolic capital in Tamil Nadu: Mahalingam, 2004). Inside a relegated group, some mechanisms provide a specific symbolic capital, which allows it to resist at least partially against the “external” repulsive forces.

One can add that a high level of symbolic does not necessarily protect from pathologies related to symbolic capital: recognition being always “relative”, a “lack of recognition” can be felt important even in middle or top positions (“misery of position”, Bourdieu and others, 1993, see also Poliak, 2006) and may also generate suffering.

How to measure symbolic capital?

In various texts, Bourdieu and his collaborators propose diverse empirical measures of symbolic capital by the construction of relevant indicators for data analysis³.

It is first (and most easily) the case in power elite and field studies. Studying various elite groups, like company leaders, writers or academics, it is relatively “natural” to find specific indicators of “notoriety”, like the presence in journalistic rankings (e.g. the “businessman of the year”), in prize lists (the “prix Goncourt” or the “Nobel prize”), etc. Being referenced in a “meritocratic” directory like the *Who’s who* or in a more socially distinctive one like the *Bottin mondain* is of course an indicator in itself. Recognition relates here again to *family names* and *first names*, their recognition, visibility, etc.

In the academic field, prizes and scientific distinctions are good proxies for measuring the amount of symbolic capital which an individual, a laboratory, a university concentrates. Citation studies (“H index”, etc.) help to measure more in-depth the amount of symbolic capital held by an individual, an institution, etc., through his/her production.

Towards a generalized multilevel conception of symbolic capital

A generalized and multilevel conception of symbolic capital implies not to restrict it to individuals in specific fields or social groups, but to enlarge it to the global social space as Bourdieu firmly suggests in *Méditations pascaliennes* (Bourdieu, 1997), and also to a large set of places and institutions at various levels, as can be inferred from *La misère du monde* (see the chapter “Effets de lieu”, Bourdieu and others, 1993).

Places concentrate symbolic capital, that is a certain level of “reputation” or “notoriety”: a town, a region, a country are not only geographical (physical) locations, composed of a set of individuals or particular institutions (companies, administrations, monuments, schools, etc.), but they can also be seen as being perceived, stigmatized or, on the contrary, overrated (in the cases of strong symbolic domination). *Geographical* characteristics of the individuals (place of birth of the individual, of his/her parents, etc., residence location, etc.), as well as some of their educational titles, may therefore help approximate empirically their level of symbolic capital. Objective measures of the concrete diffusion (“renown”) of “names” can also be used, through studies of the press, of Internet, etc., helping to understand the way people are “cited” and become more or less “visible” in social life.

Specific surveys are nevertheless necessary to grasp the mechanisms by which symbolic capital is concretely accumulated in its various, changing and contextual forms: subjective feelings of “recognition” by various individuals and institutions, experienced practices of stigmatization and at the opposite of “gratification”, all these interconnected psycho-social processes which define the “economy of symbolic goods”, need to be better described, and measured, especially to participate in the study of the quality of life.

³ For an in-depth synthesis of Bourdieu’s various specific contributions: Mauger, 2005.