

## **Operating with concepts: with and beyond Bourdieu**

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### **Abstract**

The main aim of this article is to highlight the importance of operating with concepts, accepting the challenges offered by empirical reality. To do so, the empirical material produced by the research developed by Grupo de Pesquisa em Sociologia da Educação – SOCED/PUC-Rio was used as reference. On several occasions, Bourdieu questioned the merely theoretical reading of concepts. He recommended “experimenting with theoretical things”. In this text, we seek to exemplify the consequences of the experience of operating with his concepts, focusing on two main aspects: the conditions of habitus transformation; and the empirical outline of cultural capital in school elites in prestigious institutions in Rio de Janeiro. In the case of the cultural capital study, his proposal of working “with and against authors” became evident. Although the merit of this author of Education Sociology is undeniable, the empirical outline of the cultural capital, in his vast work, was highly influenced by the French reality at the time of his research. To operate with the concept of cultural capital in a way that is appropriate to the empirical challenges we faced, we turned to authors who have addressed the transformations of the cultural field beyond the perspective of the borders between high culture and popular culture analyzed by Bourdieu.

**Key words:** Habitus – Cultural capital – Transformations – Cultural practices – School elites.

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For about a decade, the research team I coordinate – Grupo de Pesquisa em Sociologia SOCED/PUC-Rio – has been developing a research program focusing on education processes<sup>1</sup>. The main theoretical and methodological line of thought of these investigations has been the sociology of Pierre Bourdieu. In his vast work, he privileged two themes of great importance for education sociology: socialization processes and processes of producing social distinctions.

Studying Bourdieu (1989) is arduous and demands permanent investment, especially when one works on the perspective suggested by the author: “experimenting with theoretical things”. Bourdieu’s work offers an endless set of empirical work possibilities and theoretical reflection. Also, his dense theoretical-conceptual instruments, when applied to a broad set of empirical objects, offer a constant challenge to researchers who invest in analogue objects in other spatial and time contexts.

Most of the misguided analyses of Bourdieu’s work are due to either merely theoretical readings or supposedly “orthodox” readings, since the author himself pointed the importance of working *with* and *against* the authors in an unmistakable attitude of rejecting orthodoxies.

In this text, some of the consequences of the appropriation of Bourdieu’s work by our research program will be described:

- Research lessons;
- Operating with concepts – some hypotheses on the transformation of *habitus*;
- With and beyond Bourdieu – new possibilities of operating with cultural capital.

## **Research lessons**

According to Bourdieu, everything is relational in the social field. The implications of such theoretical postulate of Bourdieu’s sociology have been valuable, for they offer the researcher the conditions to perceive the specific characteristics of study objects

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<sup>1</sup> Two subitems of this article – Hypotheses on the transformation of *habitus* and With and beyond Bourdieu – are based on texts previously published on Boletim SOCED ([http://www.maxwell.lambda.ele.puc-rio.br/cgi-bin/db2www/PRG\\_1168.D2W/INPUT](http://www.maxwell.lambda.ele.puc-rio.br/cgi-bin/db2www/PRG_1168.D2W/INPUT)) with the collaboration of Helena Altmann and Maria Elena Martinez, respectively.

more accurately. In this logic, the production of the object framework allows one to perceive the relative position in the set of similar objects, permitting better assessment of sense (value, meaning, pertinence) in a particular social configuration. Bourdieu's proposal of experimenting with theoretical things, on the other hand, obliges the researcher to operate with concepts, that is, to use them as tools for constructing the empirical phenomena that constitute the investigation focus. It is, thus, the opposite of the still most common academic practice, in which theoretical discourses precede and connect with pre-constructed study objects. The most common result of the overvaluation of theoretical references is the "*theory effect*" (Bourdieu 1989: 47). Such effect leads researchers to see what they were already inclined to find, that is, researchers end up involved in the antithesis of the research activity which proposes the problems and questions to be truly researched. The recurrence of the theoretical frameworks which preceded research – so common at the beginning of graduate study programs in Brazil – and imposed themselves on research objects was a quite common expression of such mistake. In the text "*Teoria como hipótese*" (Brandão 2002), the author develops this reflection addressing research work among us and makes the operational meaning of theories explicit in a perspective that is very close to the one proposed by Bourdieu.

Rejection of methodological monisms is a very suitable proposal for the always-provisional character of research due to the complexity of social objects. The oppositions *quantitative vs. qualitative*, *structure vs. history*, *questionnaires vs. interviews*, *micro vs. macro* are fake and much more related with the "*arrogance of ignorance*" (BOURDIEU 1989: 25) than with the theoretical-methodological appropriateness of the problem being investigated. The inability to completely analyze a social object from a single angle is an issue of epistemological order, not of methodological order. It is not about going from one extreme to the other either (and from "micro social" to "macro social"), in a linear perspective of continuity. It is rather about presuming the complexity of the study objects in the field of social sciences and seeking to work from the perspective of the *game of scales* (Revel 1998). Only by linking different scales of observation can one increase the intelligibility conditions of social phenomena in their multiple configurations and constant transformations (Collins, 2008). The several perspectives to which the study objects can be subject in the social science field do not necessarily have to be developed by all the research in

the field of social sciences. Dialogue with peers, based on an accurate bibliographical review, can perfectly evidence what one gains and what one loses with the theoretical-methodological choices that guided a certain investigation project. The self-objectification perspective is another research lesson which helps researchers timely correct the research bias caused by their “most profound and unconscious adherences, exactly the ones that often constitute the ‘interest’ of the studied object itself to the one who studies it..” (Bourdieu 1989: 51). According to Bourdieu, this is one of the toughest exercises in the art of research, but it is necessary. Every researcher is inserted in a struggling field (academic/scientific) where the risk of the interest in “winning” might supplant the interest in knowledge. “Flattering the audience” is not uncommon, because developing alliances and being acknowledged (welcome) by peers may become more important than debating, disagreeing or criticizing, practices that are necessary for the improvement of research and thus for the advancement of knowledge.

### **Operating with concepts**

In the perspective of operating with concepts, the researcher (Bourdieu, 1989) cautions

[...] against the fetishism of concepts and of ‘theory’, which results from the inclination to consider the ‘theoretical’ tools, habitus, field, capital etc., themselves, instead of making them work, instead of putting them into action. (p. 27)

*Habitus*, Bourdieu’s most “popular” concept, has also been the most criticized because a mechanical and inescapable character of producing the social “reproduction” is often attributed to it. However, Bourdieu repeatedly underscored that the notion of *habitus* aimed at breaking away from the intellectualist philosophy of action, which was based on the assumption that every truly human action had a rational character. Consequently, he prioritized the analysis of *practical reasons*, the ones that, according to him, are the most common in social life: the ones that, having been socially embodied, allow agents to act according to their “sense of the game,”

that is, to act in the social space (society) according to the rules of the social game (which may vary according to the different fields) without having to appeal to reason every time to decide what to do. By focusing on *practical reasons*, the sociologist does not deny rational action, but simply emphasizes the weight of the *practical reasons* generated by *habitus* in social life: “*Habitus* is a rationality operator, but of a practical rationality, immanent in a historical system of social relations and, thus, transcendent to the individual” (Bourdieu; Wacquant, 1992, p. 26).

Bourdieu (1979) draws attention to the inseparable relationship between fields and *habitus*. *Habitus* is the knowledge learnt by agents while inserted in a certain field. Each field, structured differentially in a relatively autonomous way, is defined by a particular functioning logic, which structures the several interactions which occur within it, defining specific goals to be met so that the agents may maintain or improve their relative positions in the competition struggle in that space. In this sense, each field functions as a space of possibilities – like a “*game*” in which the agents’ “*assumed positions*” result from their relative positions in the field structure, and whose strategies (*sens du jeu*) are related simultaneously to the resources available (capitals) and to their goals (preserve or transform the position one occupies in the field).

Field “structures” are important in the construction of the *habitus*. However, the agents’ actions are not totally determined by such structures. Bourdieu emphasizes the “sense of the game” in social actions: when playing, agents develop the ability to comply with the rules of the field in which they are; but the moves cover only a set of alternatives, which may be extended by possible regulated improvisations generated by *habitus*.

### **Hypotheses on the transformation of *habitus***

Agents can only participate in the “game” if they have a minimum capital<sup>2</sup> specific to the field they are in. Fields, where agents circulate driven by the need to *be in the social game*, are the *loci* where they operate, capitalize themselves and alter their

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<sup>2</sup> “[...] the specific logic of each field determines the ones which work in this market, which are relevant and efficient in the game in question, which, in the relationship with this field work as specific capital, and this way, as an explanation factor of the practices. [...] the social position and the specific power which the agents obtain in a particular field depend, most of all, on the specific capital which they can mobilize” (Bourdieu, 1979, p. 127).

*habitus* by mobilizing different types of capital. In each field, a specific type of capital predominates (artistic, scientific, religious...), functioning as a specific currency of that field. Its ownership allows agents to continue in the (social) game and accumulate more of that specific capital as they move. “Throws” and “moves” depend on the volume and global structure of the capital accumulated by the agents in their previous experiences in different fields, in connection with the specific capital of that specific field. Such moves (trajectories/strategies) in the social space – moving through the different fields with differentiated relationships and permanencies according to the interests which mobilize them (always consistent with the *habitus* they have) – reflect the modification of the capital structure and volume of different agents.

Thus, the possibilities of transforming the *habitus* may be thought (i) from the point of view of the movements and struggles which take place in one field and (ii) from the perspective of the circulation between different social fields. Moreover, the *habitus* may also be transformed through reflexive (and thus rational) analysis of the dispositions themselves, as Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) pointed out.

### ***(i) Struggles that produce changes***

Bourdieu sees the field as a place of competition struggles which aim to preserve or transform the power relations therein. The field is thus a place of constant change. As Louis Pinto (1998) states,

Pierre Bourdieu never compared the field to a game of blind forces. In a field there are real possibilities of transformation, but they are very different depending on the position one occupies. (p. 10)

In other words, agents, due to their capital endowment (volume and structure), which results from the trajectories and positions they occupy in the field, tend to act to either preserve the capital distribution among agents (hierarchies) or subvert this distribution. Considering that the *habitus* develops from the insertion of the agent with the necessary dispositions to remain in the games played in social fields, position changes in the field and the transformations of capital volume and structure imply modifications in the *habitus* itself.

In each field, the established hierarchy is continuously contested and the principles which support the field structure can be challenged and questioned. According to

Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992), agents act – by means of categories of perception and social appreciation – on the situation which determines them, but they are never free of the social conditionings which produce the *habitus*. Therefore, an *a priori* subject, an ahistorical subject, who is not in any way determined by the social, does not exist. In the social world, there are objective structures independent of the agents' consciousness and will, which are capable of guiding or imposing themselves on individuals' practices and/or representations. Consequently, social practices are not mechanical actions produced by social structures, but the result of *habitus* transformations resulting from the relationships established by the agents through their mobility in specific fields, and in the relationship networks that they build while circulating through the fields in the social space<sup>3</sup>.

The habitus [...] being a product of history, is a system of open dispositions that is continuously confronted by new experiences and thus continuously affected by them. It is durable, but not immutable (p. 108)

### ***(ii) Moving through social space***

The need to advance the empirical knowledge of the process of constant transformation of the *durable dispositions (habitus)* has led us to formulate some hypotheses on the conditions of *habitus* conversions and reconversions.

One of the hypotheses is related to the movement extension and frequency of different agents through social space: because of their *habitus* (developed under certain life conditions and according to particular social trajectories), they are more or less likely to circulate and play in different fields. In turn, more or less circulation through social fields with permanence conditions – that is, conditions of acting in the fields – will depend on the degree of complexity of the *habitus*. Our hypothesis is that the variety of capitals present in the *habitus* structuring, thanks to the transit and moves of the agents in several fields, may grant more plasticity to the *habitus*. The consequence of such condition is a growing and readier possibility of converting or reconverting the dispositions to think, act, feel, and like, enduing them with more and

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<sup>3</sup> Expression used by Bourdieu as a synonym of society to indicate the relatively autonomous character of the fields which compose the social world.

more plural, complex, and distinct traits<sup>4</sup>. In this process, “durability<sup>5</sup>”, one of the characteristics of the *habitus*, becomes harder to apprehend.

Capital accumulation conditions are proportional to the game opportunities that the agents have in social fields. These opportunities, however, do not seem to be circumstantial or random, because they are normally restricted by the agents’ capital volume and structure in relation to the conditions (of capital volume and structure) of the other agents involved in the game in a specific field, because, as we have seen before, for Bourdieu, “in the social, everything is relational”.

From such perspective, the acquisition and accumulation of specific capitals (economic, linguistic, scientific, sports etc.) imply objective conditions of establishing relationships with other agents in a certain field. These actions depend on the relative positions of the group of agents in that specific field (which tend to present a certain homology with the positions reached in other fields) and confer to each agent a “sense of the game” more or less appropriate to the conditions of transformation or conservation of the relative positions in the fields. Logically, the bigger the capital volume, the better the agents’ conditions to control the game. Nevertheless, it is important to remember that, in the dynamic perspective of the *habitus*/capitals-fields relations, no position conquered in a certain field is everlasting, because the social space consists of a set of fields that interact, despite their relative autonomy, creating a super dynamics which imposes itself on the specific fields.

The complexification of the *habitus* of agents who circulate and “play” in several fields would, hypothetically, offer more conditions for its structural diversification, and, consequently, for an increase in the total capital volume. Therefore, in principle, agents provided with complex *habitus* have optimal chances of reaching higher social positions in the social space. Conversely, certain groups of agents who, due to their social life conditions, have fewer opportunities to act and circulate through different fields would have a simpler capital structure and volume. Such agents would thus have reduced chances of constituting more complex *habitus*.

Let us imagine two extreme situations to work on this problem:

- Agents who, since the constitution of their primary *habitus* and thanks to their social origin, are exposed to a socialization agenda characterized

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<sup>4</sup> In the sense of distinguishing, differentiating, ranking and, therefore, “keeping distances”.

<sup>5</sup> Permanent nucleus or basic structure of *habitus*.



by the family experience of participating in the “social game” in a wide variety of fields (educational, cultural, economic, religious, political...) get used to the constant mobility through social fields. This mobility increases their ability to adapt their actions to the different rules found in the different fields. The constant exercise of converting and reconverting capitals to meet the specific demands and motivations of the social games in which they get involved (in the different fields) tends to provide these agents with a more flexible structure of capitals. Logically these paths – because they grant more plasticity to the forms of acting, thinking, and feeling – tend to favor the accumulation and diversification of capitals from an early age.

- Other agents, also due to their social origin, end up being subject to a family socialization process in which daily routines offer them few opportunities of social circulation. Their family members wake up at around 5 or 6 a.m., spend one or two hours commuting to work, work for eight hours performing mostly repetitive and manual activities which offer few chances of diversified social interactions (in the sense of social exchanges which extend their symbolic and material universe), usually have lunch at the workplace and, at the end of the day, they spend one or two commuting back home, where they face the same problems and everyday tensions, which they try to forget by watching TV or socializing with friends in the neighborhood, before going to sleep to restart their daily routine. Obviously, the durable *dispositions* or *habitus* of this group of agents are shaped mostly in their family context (where the primary *habitus* are constituted) and, secondly, in the relationships with neighbors and co-workers, who probably face the same constraints to the diversification of their experiences. The social position occupied in the work field and the survival demands dominate their everyday life and refer them to social moves that are mostly very predictable and that hardly favor social strategies that could potentially impel them up the social ladder.<sup>6</sup>

Confronted with both situations, one realizes that, in principle, in the first case, there would be more opportunities of *habitus* transformations to face the “social game,” whereas, in the second case, the agents who are subject to everyday situations and lifestyles, always more similar to those of their family and neighbors, would in principle have fewer opportunities to increase the volume and structure of their *habitus* capitals.

Finally, another way of modifying acquired dispositions would depend on reflexive analysis work to be developed by the agents themselves. In this sense, sociological research would play a key role, because according to Bourdieu (1990),

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<sup>6</sup> For a different reading on the conditions of extending the “moves” in the adverse field of the popular sectors, refer to Lahire, 1997.

[...] it is through the illusion of freedom from social determinations that the freedom to exert social determinations exists [...] Paradoxically, sociology sets one free by freeing one from the illusion of freedom, or rather, from the misleading belief in illusory liberties. Freedom is not a datum, but an achievement, a collective one. (p. 28).

Freedom – which will always be relative – could be reached by means of work of re-appropriating the determinants. It is in this sense that, on another occasion, the author states that the task of sociology is to denaturalize the social world and make it not fateful (Bourdieu; Wacquant, 1992), which would allow us to perceive where the possibilities of transformation would be.

### **With and beyond Bourdieu:** new possibilities of operating with cultural capital

Our research team developed a survey which consisted of three questionnaires answered by students, families, and teachers of nine prestigious schools in Rio de Janeiro. The answers indicated the social and cultural practices of these groups, who increasingly embodied elements of the consumption culture, distancing themselves from the logic and the social practices of the cultural elites studied by Bourdieu in France in the 1960s and 1970s.

The first data analysis led us to question which would be the characteristics and distinction patterns of the cultural practices and lifestyles of the top segments of the social hierarchies in relation to the segments of the working class. This objective implied going beyond Bourdieu to understand the emergence of *other cultural patterns*, in the sense of other ways of seeing, reading, perceiving and representing the social world (Martín-Barbero, 1998). In this movement towards the outline and contents of the social practices of the population investigated by our group, a characteristic became very evident as the one that, at least initially, would guarantee new distinction patterns – the volume of information capital of the agents being studied.

### **Recreating distinctive settings:** the power of information capital

One of the most relevant dimensions in the characterization of the studied group, in the cultural practices field, is the access to information. The quality of social life in

urban spaces, increasingly complex in big cities like Rio de Janeiro, demands a type of constantly updated knowledge which links the local level with global settings. On the other hand, this link is necessary not only to understand and give meaning to everyday life, but also to develop strategies based on the anticipation of short-term future scenarios:

The increased eclecticism of the tastes and practices of the upper classes and the segmentation of the cultural environment of the working classes constitute the two faces of the same reality, that is: growing difficulty to equalize social groups with repertoires of unified homogeneous practices and preferences, at the very moment when the economic inequalities between these groups are getting stronger. This deunification of class cultures, in a context of growing inequalities, manifests the specific and often neglected importance of the purely economic parameters of the social stratification of lifestyles. (Coulangeon 2004: 76)

However, in the contemporary world, this possibility is not democratically distributed, because it is strongly conditioned by socioeconomic conditions. It is related to the use of new information technologies, considered not only a mere medium – because they produce, store and transmit information capital –, but as a means of outflow and guidance of the flow of symbolic and material exchanges. The access to new and sophisticated technologies, always requiring replacement due to fast technological advances, demands time, money and ever increasing schooling, which tends to exclude most of the agents of the lower classes. Thus,

[...] information capital tends to divide men and women into informationally rich and poor individuals, those who generate information value for the capital and those who are excluded from the process of generating, registering, communicating, and consuming value information. Societies that do not develop information technologies, with all the social relations and agencies involved in them, tend not only to be underinformed in comparison with the main capitalist countries, but also to erect, inside their own borders, even deeper divisions between their quite well informed minorities and their poorly informed vast majorities. (Dantas 2002: 198)

In Brazil, the upper and middle classes, who have reasonable access to utilities, have started to demand, according the author above, interactive services which give them access to new patterns of consumption and entertainment behaviors (cable TV, online shopping, short life digital gadgets, internet access etc). The concentration of

big corporations in the management of newspapers, magazines, publishing houses, open TV, cable TV, and internet has important consequences on the tastes and consumption patterns of the different population levels.

It is noteworthy that the information capital, analyzed by Dantas (2002), generates information value with important consequences to the material level, and that such information capital can be converted into economic and social capitals. As for the specificity of the cultural capital of the studied group, we consider that the information capital is informational capital with the characteristics of cultural supplies, therefore acting as a dimension of the structure of the cultural capital<sup>7</sup>. Thus, informational capital defines not only the new modes of capital production and flow, but also the new lifestyles of groups and families.

The accumulation of informational capital became evident through the agents' wide resources for newspaper and magazine subscriptions, through watching TV news, talk shows, debates, and documentaries, besides the education level of their families and the access to the investigated schools, which are considered to be among the best in Rio de Janeiro. These data place these agents in a position of potential opinion disseminators in the context of the Brazilian population. Brazil's low education levels<sup>8</sup>, in spite of the efforts made in the latest decade to expand the public school system, are proof of the differential of the studied group, since the cultural reading and consumption practices identified by the survey/SOCED, imply new lifestyles and very high education levels for the Brazilian standards.

### **Transformations in cultural practices**

In a recent survey on the cultural practices of the French, Olivier Donnat (2004)<sup>9</sup> pointed out how the tastes and the uses of free time, as well as the variety of the appropriation modes of cultural works and products, are marked by a complexity of factors. The author emphasizes that, beyond cultural heritage, cultural practices can be developed out of the household and even in reaction to it. Hence, the young can

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<sup>7</sup> Bourdieu also uses the expression "informational capital" as an equivalent to cultural capital. In the context of this text, though, we have used it as one of the components of the cultural capital structure.

<sup>8</sup> On average, Brazilians attend school for 5.7 years (PNAD/IBGE, 2000).

<sup>9</sup> The author collected data on newspaper, magazine and book reading, attendance to theaters, movie theaters, concerts, museums, sports events, time spent watching TV, listening to the radio and to CDs etc.

preserve their family tastes or reject them. In fact, what we find most often are combinations of heritage (or heritage refusal) with other influences, among which peer groups seem to have an important presence. Therefore, this variety of tastes would be responsible for the changes in the patterns of cultural practices over generations.

In a recent text, analyzing the forms of transmission of “cultural passions<sup>10</sup>” in the French context, Donnat (2004) indicates that parents are the main *source of such passions*.

The fact that the young generations are twice as likely to inherit a passion in the art and culture domain – and that two thirds of the relatives who transmitted them have not received them themselves – is proof of the diffusion of the “desire” for culture, especially in the musical domain, as well as of the profound renovation of the transmission conditions. On the other hand, it is necessary to recognize that *culture continues*, in relation to the other domains of free time, to be a *place where reproduction mechanisms work most effectively and where inequalities*, measured by the beginning level of studies or by social origin, *remain strong*. (p.14, my emphasis)

The cultural practices of the young studied by SOCED indicate results that are quite consistent with the observations made by Donnat (2003): children seem to follow and extend the experiences of their parents.

With regard to reading, 54% of the young we studied stated they love going to book stores and 38% indicated reading to be one of their favorite activities<sup>11</sup>. In a country of few readers, if we take into account the age of these students (13/14 year-olds), this group of young people is certainly distinct because literature is among the set of their social and cultural practices.

The group of parents who answered the questionnaire stated that they go to shopping malls and restaurants on a regular basis. Going to bookstores, to the theater, and movie theaters, although less frequently, is also among their favorite activities. Our research team expected a higher rate of cultural practices considered ‘high culture’. In Brazil, the imaginary that identifies ‘high’ culture with the European tradition patterns, especially the French (perceiving the cultural practices related to

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<sup>10</sup> The data in Donnat’s research indicate that more than one third of the 5200 individuals aged 14 or more declared to have learned in their households an activity that was important in their lives, a “passion” in the cultural domain, scientific leisures, foreign languages etc.

<sup>11</sup> However, it is important to point out that 22% of the studied students stated that they have a hard time finishing books that they start reading.

museums, classical music, literature etc. as superior) persists, mainly among the middle class, in which “cultural goodwill” (Bourdieu, 1979) prevails. We have observed, however, that the cultural consumption of the analyzed elite fractions has undergone an ‘Americanization’ process<sup>12</sup>. The favorite destinations of people going abroad, for example, are the U.S.A. and Canada, Europe, and Latin America<sup>13</sup>, in that order.

Several authors – Ortiz (1994), Garcia-Canclini (1998), and Sarlo (2002) – had already signaled an alteration in the patterns of cultural consumption due to the impact of cultural globalization. Garcia-Canclini (1998) pointed out reduced attendance to public spaces with classical cultural offers (bookstores, museums, theaters, movie theaters, and music halls) as a consequence of the characteristics of urban life complexification – time availability, transportation difficulties and fear of violence. Ortiz also (1994) pointed out that:

‘Classical’ values no longer organize cultural life. Instead, cultural life is organized by what some authors call ‘the culture of going out.’ The art of living does not take ‘high culture’ for reference, but the types of ‘going out’ performed by individuals – going to a rock concert, to the opera, to restaurants, to movie theaters, to the theater, going on vacation. The opposition ‘high culture’ vs. ‘popular culture’ is replaced by another one: ‘the ones who go out frequently’ versus ‘the ones who stay home’. [...] Mobility, a characteristic of modern life, becomes a sign of distinction. (p. 211)

Our empirical data confirm the observations above. The data collected on attendance to museums and cultural centers are insufficient to assess the weight that these practices have in the lives of these young people. We have verified, though, low attendance to high culture events (opera, ballet and concerts), since the option “never attends” was marked by 57% of the respondents.

### **Would economic capital recreate cultural borders?**

The interaction among cult and popular tastes, industrial production and circulation of nearly all symbolic goods, with business standards of cost

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<sup>12</sup> The term “Americanization” refers to the orientation and embodiment of practices and goods of the United States cultural industry, such as information services, entertainment, and tourism.

<sup>13</sup> It is worth pointing out that Latin America is in the last position in the rank of preferences, showing an internationalization process of the elites, who are choosing first-world countries.

and efficiency, is rapidly changing the devices that organize what we now consider “to be cultured” is in modern times. (Garcia-Canclini, 1998, p. 63)

The rapid alterations in the cultural field, especially in the last decades, are evident in the profiles of the agents studied. Such alterations require the broadening of the theoretical-empirical research references, initially very marked by the works of Bourdieu. The Brazilian authors Nestor García-Canclini (1998), Renato Ortiz (1994) and Maria of the Graça Setton (2005) have been essential references for the interpretation of the peculiarities of the cultural field in Brazil and Latin America. Among French authors, the most recent contributions of Donnat (2003) and Coulangeon (2004) allowed further reflection on the current outline of the cultural capital of the studied groups, as well as on the issue of the new distinctive patterns of the elites. Coulangeon (2004), in particular, was an author who enabled us to better construct some empirical-theoretical bridges for the analysis of capital conversions and for the assessment of the current meaning of the contributions of economic capital to the re-creation of sociocultural distances.

In the early 1990s, García-Canclini (1998) had already pointed out that in Brazil and Latin America, one could not talk about a unified class structure – or about a hegemonic class, the local equivalent of the bourgeoisie of the French studies – capable of imposing its own matrix of meanings to the entire system. In Latin America, development was marked both on the economic and symbolic levels by a multiplicity of cultural agendas as a result of the permanent tension between the patrimonial tradition and the modernizing impulse. The result was a fragmented symbolic field, strongly marked by cultural heterogeneity which, according to the author, creates a symbolic and economic combination of very different characteristics from those found in the main capitalist countries. Even when economic modernization, school expansion, and mass communication systems seek to promote a certain homogenization of the social systems, the coexistence of diverse cultural traditions associated with the intense creation and dissemination of contemporary cultural products permanently produces and reproduces heteronomy on the cultural level.

In spite of this, the consequences of globalization, from the point of view of the massification of culture and consumption practices, have been frequently interpreted in their homogenizing consequences. Nevertheless, beyond the appearance of

approximation of the cultural practices of the different social levels, an exploration of our research material in dialogue with other researchers has allowed us to indicate that, under the cover of the democratization of aesthetic tastes and social practices, new ways of stratification are reconstructed, preserving the symbolic distance between the elites and the sectors of the population who are positioned on the lower levels of social stratification.

This characteristic is signaled in the French context today:

[...] some empirical evidence imposes, first of all, the need to break the view of a dominant class unified by the veneration of high culture works. In fact, it seems that *nowadays, the lifestyle of the upper classes is characterized less by the cultural legitimacy of preferences and habits than by the eclecticism of tastes and practices.* (Coulangeon 2004: 60, my emphasis)

It is noteworthy that the concept of cultural capital, coined by Bourdieu, was grounded on the hypothesis of this *new type of capital* working as a kind of retranslation of the economic capital into cultural hierarchies in the societies where power and privileges are no longer translated into property or nobility titles. According to Coulangeon, cultural capital produces a more refined distinction power due to its double arbitrariness: (1) the ignorance of the class character of cultural practices; and (2) the acknowledgement of the culture of the elites as the only legitimate one.

Transformations in the cultural field, such as the ones that took place in the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, have been altering the patterns of cultural and social practices which used to distinguish the groups that were positioned on the upper levels of social hierarchies. Such changes, according to Coulangeon (2004),

[...] weaken the distinction model, but do not invalidate it [...], *the eclecticism of the upper classes somehow embodies the contemporary form of a cultural legitimacy founded on aesthetic tolerance and transgression of the boundaries between generations, social groups and ethnic communities, in relation to which social stratification of attitudes remains very sharp.* (p. 80, my emphasis)

Such eclecticism can also be observed in the data produced by our *survey*, which has led us to emphasize the analysis of the internal structure of the cultural capital of the studied groups. It has become increasingly necessary to think about cultural



practices that are more distinctive because of style, intensity and physical spaces where they take place than because of their content. That is the case, for example, of museum attendance (in Brazil or abroad), learning foreign languages (in extracurricular courses or in *bilingual schools*), university degrees (in traditional *universities* or in *recently founded ones* because of university “democratization”), the access to information and to the digitalized world (via school and media or *by means of trips* and of the *unlimited resources present* in the bedrooms and houses of the young studied).

The multiplicity of material, cultural, symbolic, and economic resources – indicated by many of the students and parents we studied – offers very particular conditions to extend *habitus*, adding conditions to maintain or improve the positions of relative distinction that they occupy in the social fields.

Such plasticity of the *habitus* is, from my point of view, one of the main advantages of the new elites to guarantee their distinction, which is itself founded on life and consumption patterns normally accessible only to the social levels that are in the upper income levels in Brazil, such as the ones of the subjects of our survey. Everything has led us to believe that Coulangeon (2004) is right when he stresses the need for paying more attention to the economic component of the persistence of distinctions in the cultural sphere:

The theoretical challenge that the changes observed in the social stratification of tastes and cultural practices represents forces us to analyze the production of legitimacy effects in a context in which the elites have lost the monopoly of prescribing cultural norms. The contemporary French society [as well as the Brazilian society] appears, from this point of view, as a society in which socioeconomic inequalities are not as strongly supported by symbolic domination forms as they were in the past. (p. 81)

In spite of the relaxation of the borders between class cultures (Setton, 2005), it seems that distinctive traits of cultural practices and lifestyles persist, maintaining and strengthening social hierarchies. The empirical material which we have produced, thanks to the investigations of the SOCED research team, offers some elements which make it possible to suppose that, also among us, a recrudescence of the economic barriers that impact lifestyles and material and cultural consumption practices is underway, which reconfigure in symbolic capital and social power.

The agents studied operate with a repertoire of social practices that result from privileged conditions of circulation through different fields, where they capitalize new resources with which they struggle to maintain the “distinction” in the social space. The combination ‘spare time’ and ‘resources’ always weighs in favor of those who have the privilege of choosing intellectual work in the social division of labor.

The availability of digital electronic technologies in the household, as it is the case of the agents studied, has even been altering the meaning of “being at home” for these young people and their families, who can be connected with friends and with the world through the internet and can enjoy countless cultural leisure practices. This world which is available at the touch of a button eloquently expresses the radical separation between the minorities, who enjoy a life standard only accessible to the upper levels of social hierarchies, and the vast majority of the population, who survives on less than or a little more than one minimum salary and whose source of information is almost exclusively the TV and the radio.

### ***From within and up close: a new scale for looking*** <sup>14</sup>

The fieldwork developed during two terms in three of the nine schools where the survey was conducted has led us to turn to another investigation scale. From within and up close, we constructed another theoretical-methodological design to face the challenge of approximating the lenses to the specific configurations of the schooling processes in the schools investigated. We used resources from the interactionist perspectives of analysis, allying the relational perspective to the notion of field. We chose to do case studies in schools with quite distinct pedagogical-educational projects and that attracted a public who, besides having an interest in the teaching quality, had specific demands regarding values and styles of teaching relations for the education of their children.

The case study provided us with a privileged observation field to formulate a more detailed interpretation of education projects, institutional self-images (representations of students, parents, the board, teachers and teaching and administration teams), organograms, management and leadership styles, school

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<sup>14</sup> The expression in italics was coined by José Guilherme Cantor Magnani (2002) in an article on urban ethnography.

climate, teacher profile, curriculum models, school schedule, architecture (space distribution), the use of specific spaces – such as libraries, laboratories, thematic rooms, auditoria, chapels etc. –, inter-institution relations, social programs, extracurricular activities, promotion of institutional image (on school websites, leaflets, media...) etc.

Attention and epistemological vigilance guided our observations on three levels:

- The *self-objectification* (Bourdieu, 1989) level of the researchers in relation to the work process in the field, to the expectations, strategies, perceptions and feelings during the observation period;
- The level of the interactions with school agents in the field, during the interviews and research presentations in the institutions;
- The recording level of the multiple languages, be them expressions of spatial and symbolic distributions, interior design (indicating differential values of the activities and of the institutional subgroups), or the language used by the agents studied in different contexts and situations, indicating horizontalities or asymmetries in the institutional power structures.

Document analysis was developed from the perspective of content analysis, making it possible to identify how frequently certain topics, ideas, and words appear in a text, seeking to assess more objectively the relative weight of certain issues, ideas, and values in documents, projects and institutional programs, or in interviews conducted with school agents (principals, coordinators, school technicians, or teachers).

The data constructed through the survey were always related to more general data from the Brazilian education system (SAEB, ENEM, and INEP) to clarify the specificities of the cases studied. Therefore, the relational approach, with all the conceptual equipment proposed by Bourdieu, and the references on social stratification and mobility in Brazil (Pastore; Valle; Silva, 2000) were essential for the interpretation of the distinctive aspects of the agents and institutions investigated.

This article sought to describe some of the team strategies used by SOCED to develop an “empirical translation of concepts” in Bourdieu’s perspective of “experimenting with theoretical things”.

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