METACAPITAL: A RESPONSE TO PIERRE BOURDIEU

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Let me begin with a general statement that I take to hold good within each of the diverse forms of the nation state in the advanced capitalist world. No form of cultural production or circulation within this sphere, I argue, lies beyond the reach of the regulatory activity of the state; and any “oppositional” mode of cultural production and circulation, without exception, has as its condition of possibility the play between capital investment and state regulation.

For analytic purposes we can isolate two different levels of state involvement in cultural activity. The first is that of direct state support of cultural institutions through grant mechanisms, subsidies, and tax breaks to producers; the subsidization of public broadcasting; the administration of royalties or public lending rights; and financial support of libraries, galleries, and museums. The second is that of the various indirect mechanisms by which the conditions of cultural activity are shaped: the grant or sale of licenses to use the airwaves; the legislative creation of intellectual property rights; the crafting of company law and taxation law to construct corporate and individual rights, protections, and forms of subsidy; the application of tariffs; the policing of international intellectual property covenants and of international market regulation and deregulation; and antitrust legislation and enforcement (as it relates, for example, to the vertical and lateral integration of the culture and information industries).

The first of these levels, we could say, is “political” and explicit in aiming to achieve particular policy ends. The second is infrastructural and often less explicitly directed to “cultural” ends; it has to do with the basic structure of markets in the cultural industries -- that is, with the conditions of existence of economic capital, which are constructed by the legal apparatus of the national state. In addition, a series of regulatory
mechanisms governs the content and conditions of access and diffusion of cultural goods. (The example of the regulatory effect of taxes on newspapers - or indeed on paper or postage - makes it clear that it is never possible to distinguish neatly between "political" and "economic" forms of state intervention.)

Any serious cultural politics today must confront the non-identity of capital and the state (as well as of the state and consumers, the "public"), and thus understand the political ambiguity of the state as the major support both of regimes of private property and of the public sector. Such an understanding has become crucial at a time when the power of the state to regulate capital and to underpin public institutions like the school system, libraries, public broadcasting, and a public domain in information has been radically undermined by the deregulationist policies of neoliberal governments around the world. In Australia as I write a newly elected conservative government is embarking on a campaign of reduction of the size of the state apparatus which is likely to vandalize the public health system (including the crisis area of indigenous health services), the tertiary education sector, public broadcasting, environmental monitoring, and many other sites where a "public" interest can in principle be maintained against sectional (and in particular corporate) interests.

Yet on the left, and perhaps especially in the United States because of the almost complete absence of a politically viable social-democratic tradition, the defence of the public sector has been made difficult by the persistence of a libertarian model of the state -- often uncomfortably close to the libertarianism of the right -- which sees it as the simple instrument of capital and of ruling-class interests. This vision corresponds to (and indeed directly inherits) the utopianism that Koselleck describes in his argument that, in failing to respond to Absolutism in a political way, the Enlightenment project instead developed a moralistic mode of thought which defined itself in opposition to the State and outside the constraints of the political process.¹ We know (from bitter historical experience) about the state as a source of terror and repression; we are much less comfortable with the notion that we have a stake in defending the state against its enemies.

The fundamental move that Bourdieu makes is to stress the ambivalence of the state formation, and to recognize that, rather than being the simple instrument of other interests, it displaces social conflicts into its own specific forms. Yet this move raises rather than solves the question of the workings of state power.

As I read it, two rather different models of the state are deployed, as though interchangeably, in this paper. The first is that of the sovereign state, explicitly modelled on the formation of the European absolutist state in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. From the citation of Tilly's work it is clear that Bourdieu takes as the general form of the state
the centralized European nation-state with its interdependent features of a national standing army and centrally enforced and collected taxation. In this model the state is characterized by its homogeneity rather than by its possession of a plurality of functions and effects. It thus tends to be described in terms of a functionalist model of necessary effects, since what must be explained is how the flow of power from the center is accepted and absorbed by those on whom it is imposed. What is “astonishing” about the workings of this sovereign state is, in Hume’s words, “the degree of ease with which power can be imposed.” From this astonishment follows a series of tautologies structured around the classic sociological question: how is it that social order is secured?

The key role in this process of securing consent to the imposition of power is assigned to symbolic capital; but this is a purely circular explanation, since symbolic capital is defined only as the power to command recognition of political legitimacy. A second layer of explanation is thus added to this: symbolic violence is said to be exercised with the complicity of those who undergo it, and is grounded in an accord between the structures of the objective order and mental structures. The domination of the state is exercised through a “thought of the state” which is developed through a series of mediating institutions such as the schooling system in a process that produces the “accord” that underlies state order. Again, however, this is a tautological explanation. As with the concept of habitus, apparent effects are derived from a structure which is postulated a posteriori as their cause: if the subjects of the state accept the imposition of its power it is because their mentalities are so shaped by the system of power as to be receptive to it. Interposing between the state and its subjects a mediating instance which reproduces at a subjective level the objective structure of state power, the concept of a constructed homology explains everything and nothing.

The second model of the state form at work in the paper is a conception of the state as a “bureaucratic field”: a space built over time and in which all social forces are represented. (The metaphor of the field is a familiar one in Bourdieu’s work and represents an attempt to theorize the relational play of forces within a bounded domain of the social.) Here the emphasis falls upon the multipolarity of this space and on the specificity of the functions and conflicts which occur within it. The key argument is that, without directly reflecting social struggles, bureaucratic processes turn out to be in some sense homologous with them: one of Bourdieu’s examples is of the structural tension between the “spending” ministries (health, education, welfare…) and the finance ministries, where the logic of the bureaucratic contest transposes and transforms the struggle between “dominant” and “dominated” social groups into a particular bureaucratic form.
It is this model of transposed struggle that allows Bourdieu to develop the question of the relation of intellectuals to the polity: of the specific forms that a politics of the intellectuals might take. If it is the case that the logic of the policy process involves a redirection of social antagonisms into the stylized modalities of bureaucratic argument where they retain a kind of transfigured effectivity, then struggles over specific policy issues come to seem something less than trivial. The implication is that intellectual expertise will have its particular and applied uses, rather than being subordinated to a general and trans-social mode of political action.

At some point, however, this argument about the appropriate arena of political activity is inflected with a different, Gouldnerian question about the ambiguous class status of intellectuals. I have argued elsewhere that Bourdieu is unable adequately to answer the question of the class interests of intellectuals, both because he conceives of them simply, and reductively, as a (dominated) fraction of the dominant class, but also because in some of his more recent work he invests them with a political potential which is effectively transcendent of class limits.\(^2\)

In this paper the question of the instability of class interests becomes a question about the relation between particularity and universality of interests -- a question which is resolved through the apparent paradox of a particular class interest in the universal. But the category of the "universal" deserves closer scrutiny, not perhaps so much because of its obvious metaphysical origins but because of the difficulty of being precise about its logical structure. The forms of legitimation that characterize the nation-states of modernity are predicated upon a number of rather different processes. One is what Bourdieu calls "denaturalization"--for example, the assignment of power on the basis not of ties of blood but of specific trainings (this thesis is close to a Weberian account of rationalization, and it doesn't entirely explain the continuing assignment of power on very different grounds). Another is the process of standardization of the instruments of social exchange (Bourdieu's example is the standardization of weights and measures). And another, exemplified by the centralization of the market in symbolic goods that strips traditional peasant norms of their value, is what we might call the departicularization that follows from the subordination of local regimes of value to a generalized regime. It is not immediately clear why any or all of these processes should be taken to represent a universalization in the normative sense that that word seems to carry in Bourdieu's argument.

To speak of "the" universal is to assume there is only one, a singular telos pregiven in human Reason, rather than a multiplicity of possible political mechanisms for achieving specific and necessarily limited outcomes. But, given that all interests in the universal are particular, it is not clear why there should be any need for this theoretical apparatus. If
intellectuals have a pre-existing and “particular” interest in the universal, what need is there for a politics of mobilization for the universal? Will they not act in accordance with it regardless? And if not, then perhaps it is not true that this class’s interests lie (only) in the universal. Indeed, the explicit assumption elsewhere in the paper is that there exist conflicting interests in the universal -- for example, those of “intellectuals” and those of “bureaucrats”; but if the universal is not singular it is not clear why we should bother calling it a universal rather than simply a collection of different interests. In this respect the concept functions like the purely empty notion of a “progressive” politics. It belongs to an absolutist conception of political activity which is closely linked to the model of the sovereign state and to a vision of the state as a potential vehicle of Enlightenment.

The model of the state as a bureaucratic field seems to me a good deal more fruitful than this conception, in that it lays the stress upon the “internal” structure and processes of state power rather than upon an ultimate outcome lying beyond them. It may be rather narrowly theorized, however, in ignoring the political, military, and judicial functions which the state performs, in order to focus only on its executive and administrative dynamic. More importantly, since the concept designates a limited power of action, it raises again the question of the effective reach of state power.

This problem is crystallized, I think, in the argument that the concentration of powers (of forms of capital) in the state brings about “a sort of metacapital, that is to say a capital which allows one to govern all of the other forms of capital.” In a sense this is what the state is, this power over the conditions of existence and the form of all other domains of power. Hence “struggles over the State are struggles concerning this power which has the ability to regulate the relations between the powers, the ability to regulate the course of transactions between different kinds of capital.” But is this so? Without subscribing to the thesis of the withering away of the nation-state under global capitalism, we can nevertheless doubt that any particular nation-state has all that much power to stand against the pressures of global capital: today the threat of capital flight is the limit condition under which all state regulatory activity takes place.

A final set of questions, then. What are the limits to the politics of intervention in policy issues that Bourdieu envisages? To what extent is it possible for economic capital to be confronted and contained by the regulatory apparatus of the state? Is there a general thing called “capitalism,” and must it be opposed as a whole? In the name of what can it be opposed - what is, now, the opposite of capitalism, or of the various capitalisms? Does capitalism have its own generality, or are all interests within a capitalist formation by definition limited and particular interests?
Neoliberalism, of course, would argue the former: it is global capital, "the market," that represents the most general, the most disinterested interest. If we wish (as I do) to disagree with this argument we must be sure of the grounds on which a public interest can be defended. These grounds must include a coherent theory of the state and its role in defining and maintaining a public sphere; Pierre Bourdieu's discussion takes us some way towards such a goal.

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