

## **For a Critical Theory of Modernization: Are the Brazilian Lower Classes Universal?**

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Karl Marx has posed the question about the singularity of symbolic domination in capitalist societies. He realized that capitalism, in contrast to complex societies in the past, does not need a special group of persons to legitimize the existing social order, such as the mandarins in imperial China. At least in its most important dimension, the existing order of capitalism is legitimized through a ‘spontaneous ideology’ which is generated in an opaque and subtle way. The opaque nature of this domination may be the defining characteristic of capitalism. It is certainly responsible for its exceptional efficacy and longevity.

Unfortunately, we have not made much progress in answering Marx’s question. Several factors have contributed to this. The most important is our lack of understanding of the symbolic and immaterial structure that lies at the base of capitalism and that is responsible for the specific form of *symbolic violence* that characterizes it. Mainstream theory operates with the concept of a ‘value-neutral’ institutional structure linked to a specific national culture, which is held to be the only possible symbolic reality (Souza 2007). According to this view, there is no symbolic structure underlying capitalism. For this reason, mainstream theory divides the world into advanced societies possessing a national culture, which counts for the symbolic dimension, and a neutral – perceived as non-symbolic and merely ‘material’ – institutional structure on the one hand; and underdeveloped societies with these same characteristics – but perceived under the aegis of pre-modern relicts – on the other.

As a result, the opaque character of social domination has infiltrated academic debate and colonized its concepts. Against the background of mainstream theory, it is impossible to see a common symbolic structure underlying all capitalist societies, whether at the center or on the periphery of the system. At the same time, this conservative framing of the problem does not know any national borders. There is no theoretical divide between advanced and underdeveloped societies within the academic debate itself. Supposed cultural differences between the modern and the not-yet-modern are essentialized, just as race was essentialized one hundred years ago. This is why I think that we can call this hegemonic perspective a kind of ‘racist science’.

In the first section of the paper, I explore some of the chief traits of fashionable theories of modernization, choosing those of Niklas Luhmann and Roberto DaMatta as examples. Since Luhmann is one of the most important contemporary sociologists and is not perceived as an exponent of ‘modernization theory’, showing how his ideas are in fact indebted to this perspective will effectively illustrate the all-pervasive and ongoing influence of a way of thinking that many people associate with the 1950s and 1960s. Roberto DaMatta, on the other hand, is an anthropologist whose influence has been felt throughout the whole of Latin America. DaMatta’s analysis of Latin America resembles Luhmann’s analysis of Germany to a remarkable extent, showing how these apparently disparate perspectives are interconnected. These writers provide just two examples of the large-scale division of labor involved in hegemonic conservative thinking around the globe. However, their views can be challenged by Bourdieu’s theory of symbolic violence that I outline in the second section of this paper. In so doing, I demonstrate that the symbolic dimension forms a constituent element of social structure and domination in complex modern societies. I also argue that capitalism has created a similar symbolic dimension all over the world. In order to recognize this common dimension, however, one has to go beyond Bourdieu. I attempt to do this in the third section of the paper, using Brazil as a case study.

### **The Racist Core of Mainstream Theories of Modernization**

In his essay on 'social exclusion', which was strongly debated in Germany, Niklas Luhmann (1995) seeks to incorporate what he calls the 'periphery' of capitalism into his theory of a 'world society'. According to Luhmann, modern societies regulate the distinction between inclusion and exclusion in a very specific way, producing dramatic consequences for social stability and development options. According to Luhmann, it is a characteristic of modern societies that differentiated systems regulate the balance between inclusion and exclusion. Under these circumstances, the notions of equality and human rights cease to be applicable to the entire society and become relative concepts regulated by these differentiated systems. An important consequence of this is the impossibility of legitimizing a permanent inequality that includes all functional systems. The main problem with Luhmann's theory is that, within the so-called developing or peripheral countries, a significant sector of the population is permanently and fully excluded – in the case of Brazil this affects one third of the total population (Luhmann 1995).

Despite Luhmann's clear perception of the problem and his admirable courage in facing up to it, his answers are rather disappointing and, surprisingly, resemble the solutions adhered to by the conservative culturalism prevalent in Latin America. Anyone who believes that there is a theoretical gap between the pronouncements of the avant-garde in the center and at the periphery should note this proximity. Luhmann uses a 'technological' conceptual apparatus, which appears innovative at first reading. However, a detailed analysis clearly reveals the fundamental relationship between Luhmann's approach and other theories of modernization in the center and at the periphery. Thus the internal stresses and contradictions as well as the conservative consequences of mainstream theories become evident. And this holds true not only for societies of the periphery, but for the entire social system of modernity.

As Luhmann acknowledges the existence of permanent inequality and the exclusion of significant parts of the population from all systems in peripheral societies, he is under pressure to explain them. He does so in the same vein as any other classical or contemporary theory of modernization. Although Luhmann does not use the term 'pre-modern', he claims in effect that pre-modern structures persist in these societies. But the presuppositions and consequences of the theoretical background he adopts – and only this should count for the analysis, regardless of the particular term used – are the same as for authors who continue to use the term. This strategy becomes problematic in the case of so-called emerging societies. Brazil, the underdeveloped nation which Luhmann most frequently alludes to in his essay, certainly belongs to the periphery, is certainly characterized by massive, permanent and comprehensive inequality, and is certainly 'emerging' in respect of a number of systems, e.g. the economy.

The difficulty for Luhmann's approach is to explain the co-existence of permanent inequality (or 'pre-modernity') and the modernity of several dynamic functional systems. Luhmann explains it by pointing to personal networks that push aside the anonymous and functional structures that characterize modern societies. This explanation is practically identical with culturalist views of modernization, which locate the causes of underdevelopment in the insufficient development of modern structures because of certain assumed cultural traits belonging to a given society.

It is no coincidence that this type of explanation also prevails in countries like Brazil. Roberto DaMatta (1978), the most influential conservative sociologist in contemporary Brazil and perhaps in the whole of Latin America, elaborates on the importance of personal networks by

distinguishing between persons (members of a network) and individuals (excluded from networks). This distinction is used to explain a symptom of underdevelopment that plays a leading role in any conservative theory of modernization, namely corruption. Corruption is considered to be a hallmark of underdevelopment, while modern societies are perceived as basically free of corruption. Cases of corruption in modernized societies are seen as individual failings or misdemeanours in an efficient world governed by laws and anonymity, as opposed to an inefficient world governed by personal networks and greed.

Of course, as should be clear to any critical reader, such theories legitimize prejudices against entire societies and all of their members, who are seen as corrupt, untrustworthy, inefficient and somehow unclean. These prejudices are implicit in international relations, organizations and even in face-to-face encounters. While societies classified as modern are considered to be morally superior, underdeveloped societies are viewed as backward and corrupt. The point is not to deny corruption in Brazil and elsewhere on the periphery of capitalism. However, it is dubious whether it is a defining characteristic of the periphery. Is Brazil really more corrupt than, say, Italy? Is there less corruption on Wall Street than the Avenida Paulista in São Paulo (cf. Grün 2007)? Who would be courageous enough to make such judgments after the 2008 economic crisis? If one classifies entire societies as corrupt, is this not equivalent to essentializing them and their members? And are they not being classified by means of a scientifically constructed racism?

Theories of modernization have tended to treat societies as homogenous entities, without any internal ambivalences or contradictions. This allows for the essentializing of peripheral societies as premodern creatures governed by personal networks. These networks are supposed to determine the entire hierarchy of privileges, as access to resources is monopolized by the most powerful individuals in the networks. It is not difficult to see that Luhmann and DaMatta are merely replicating a much older notion of an essentially corrupt Latin American patrimonialism that does not distinguish between private and public goods. These theorists all presuppose a meritocratic ideology underlying capitalist societies, the operation of fair competition on the basis of equal opportunities.

Conservative sociologists are able to reunite center and periphery in the same sociological framework, one that is based on an idealized image of the center as a place of fair competition and transparent political life. However, this naive view cannot adequately answer the questions posed above. It must be taken for granted to be considered in any way as a serious analysis. But this is exactly what happens in the world of global media as well as in the hegemonic realm of 'science'. Both accept a sharp distinction between types of society within a framework that places the effective and ideal ones at the center and the corrupt and ineffective ones at the periphery. This idealization of a certain type of society is at once scientifically problematic and politically conservative. It is based on an implicit racism. When we classify contemporary societies into the categories of modern societies of the center and premodern societies of the periphery, we are in effect using criteria of 'race' because the differences between societies are substantialized and essentialized. It is irrelevant whether this opposition is treated as one involving actual race, as in the nineteenth century (Stocking 1989), or as one involving 'culture', as in the twentieth century and beyond. It is important to recognize that this type of distinction is scientifically unsound and useless for practical purposes.

We should reject the assumption that societies at the center and at the periphery are undifferentiated in nature. However, even when this has been done, it is still evident that there are fundamental differences between societies like Germany or Great Britain on the one hand

and Brazil or Mexico on the other. The much larger proportion of socially excluded and marginalized people in the latter societies is striking. And this is exactly the problem that lay at the origin of Luhmann's essay. But it has to be explained in different terms from those adopted by mainstream theories of modernization of the past and present. In what follows I outline an alternative approach. I try first to show that both types of society are not *essentially* distinct in nature. Then, I deal with some specific differences. Together, I hope that these considerations might constitute the first steps toward a critical theory of modernization.

### **Beyond Pierre Bourdieu?**

The sociology of Pierre Bourdieu can be made to contribute to the task of discovering commonalities between such obviously diverse societies as Great Britain and Brazil, as other contributions to this volume show. Bourdieu has constructed a new theory of capital by distinguishing different types of capital, and especially by elaborating on the relevance of cultural capital. For him, inequality in modern society is based on unequal access to economic and cultural capital. For us, it is important to note that this is true for any modern society, be it Brazil or France. Social struggles for scarce resources rest on unequal access to resources and are thus mainly determined from the outset. It is absolutely necessary to understand the structure of the unequal distribution of resources in order to comprehend the everyday struggles of groups and individuals over both their material and immaterial resources. If academic inquiry includes the task of distinguishing relevant from less relevant objectives, then understanding the ways in which people's opportunities to lead socially valuable lives are distributed should be the focus of our concern. Other aspects of the social sciences pale in comparison.

If the conjunction of impersonal economic and impersonal cultural capital is indeed fundamental for understanding the dynamics and the inequalities of modern societies, then Brazilian or South African societies are on the same playing field as French or German ones. There is no essential difference between the structure of social struggle in Brazil and Germany. The access to cultural capital in the form of educational qualifications and family inheritance is responsible for the formation of the modern Brazilian middle class as a class of 'intellectual labor', as opposed to the 'manual labor' that is the lot of those classes that lack access to the same type of cultural capital. The very same differences are responsible for the separation between the middle and the lower classes in Germany – including their unequal access to all those material and immaterial privileges that are at stake in the class struggle.

Perhaps even more important is the fact that there is no difference between these societies in the strategies they adopt to make these social differences appear as natural and self-evident. In both central and peripheral countries, the 'symbolic violence' that legitimizes, conceals and naturalizes social domination works in an identical manner. Finally, in both types of society the subtle 'ideology of merit' lies at the core of this legitimizing process. The example of the Brazilian underclass, which I discuss below, makes this very clear. As Bourdieu (1984) has argued, the 'ideology of merit' is used to systematically conceal the social construction of differences in achievement between classes and individuals. Instead of an unequal distribution of resources, we are all encouraged to perceive merely differences in natural 'talent'.

As hierarchy and domination are produced in identical ways, the dynamic of social life is fundamentally similar in central and peripheral countries. The artificial construction of an 'essential difference' between these types of society has to be viewed as one of the mechanisms by which domination itself is sustained and reproduced. According to Luhmann, the two types differ because peripheral societies are characterized by omnipresent and

powerful 'social networks' which act as parasites on the autonomy of social systems and the freedom of organizations. This implies that, in central societies, there are no social networks of any major significance for society at large.

Bourdieu introduced a third kind of capital, which can help us understand this point. The concept of 'social capital' is precisely directed at these social networks. However, for Bourdieu, access to social capital is less important in modern societies than access to impersonal economic and cultural capital. More precisely, only those who are already in a position to dispose of economic and cultural capital have access to privileged social relations. If one fails to acknowledge the primary and fundamental importance of these impersonal types of capital – like Luhmann and DaMatta and the overwhelming majority of theorists – then conflicts over domination and class that are at issue in the unequal distribution of economic and cultural capital will certainly be overlooked. Instead of social structures, we merely see individuals who have privileged access to valuable personal relations – or who do not. On this basis, complex and dynamic societies like that of Brazil will be viewed as traditional and premodern societies whose hierarchical structures are reflected in differential access to personal networks and families.

Conventional theory renders the unequal distribution of resources invisible. What is worse, it creates the illusion that they are making a critique of morally reprehensible practices possible. Readers gain the impression of participating in a critical and morally sound endeavor, even though the very opposite is the case. The existing social conflicts in an unequal country like Brazil are never even perceived as such, since 'corruption' is the all-purpose explanation for every evil. As the privileged classes are not responsible for this type of corruption, and social conflicts do not even have a name, everyday inequality is legitimized. The more privileged classes in Brazil do not merely share the privileges of their counterparts in central societies, but they also rely on an army of cheap labor such as maids, nannies, office assistants and couriers. Their unremitting focus on corruption and the ideology of merit makes them blind to the real problem. This is enhanced by the sociological distinction between premodern societies of the periphery and modern societies of the center, an opposition which allows the privileged classes of Brazil to think of their social problems as belonging to a phase of underdevelopment which will eventually be succeeded by a developed modernity without corruption and, therefore, without social problems.

At this point, Bourdieu's sociology has a particular relevance. His theory of capital(s) could well become the point of departure for a new understanding of global capitalism and its consequences in specific contexts. It could also become the theoretical base of a truly critical theory of modernity and modernization. In this theory, the struggle between classes for access to scarce goods and resources could be understood in a global framework and become the locus for further analysis. In my view, Marx's question about the 'spontaneous ideology' of capitalism could be reformulated in a more critical and differentiated manner than has hitherto been the case.

However, we have first to apply Bourdieu's sociology more closely to the argument. A point that deserves special attention in this regard is what I would call Bourdieu's 'moral contextualism'. For this discussion, I draw on two bodies of work. First, Bourdieu's book *Algeria 1960* (1979) and, secondly, the collective volume entitled *The Weight of the World* (1999). His writings on Algeria are of particular interest because Bourdieu here deals with the standard enemies of any critical theory: in particular rational choice theory, that is to some degree implicit in any existing version of modernization theory – old or new – in sociology or political science, and presupposes adaptation to economic 'rationality'.

Bourdieu regards social class as something determined by relational practices that are mainly acquired in non-intentional learning processes. This insight constituted a major step forward in the sociology of modern societies, as it allowed for a more differentiated theoretical and empirical understanding of human social structures. On the basis of this theory, developed in a so-called 'premodern' society, Bourdieu was able to formulate an absolutely new and critical interpretation of a so-called 'modern' society – France (1984) – a work which made his name. His analysis of the logic of non-intentional solidarities and prejudices that legitimize privileged and permanent access to scarce goods and resources was groundbreaking.

In the case of colonial Algeria, Bourdieu developed the same argument with reference to what he called 'attitudes of economic calculation'. While it is usually assumed that such attitudes automatically develop wherever the monetary economy is introduced, Bourdieu demonstrated that they are only acquired under certain conditions in certain social classes. His argument develops the insight that the social norm is only perceived as normal and natural because it is invisibly internalized by the privileged classes as part of their education. The norm then serves as a barrier between those who have adapted to the modern social order and those who have not, and remain poor and humiliated.

However, shortcomings are apparent in Bourdieu's entire body of work, from the writings on Algeria to his final essays. Even though he was a powerful critic of the modernization theories dominant during his lifetime, he could not rid himself entirely of the presuppositions typical of these theories. One example is his assumption that their conditions of existence are 'transitory' for the underclasses that he called 'sub-proletariate'. According to Bourdieu and modernization theory in general, the sub-proletariate is a product of peasants flocking to the more developed cities. Because this displaced peasantry never managed to acquire the material and non-material resources to succeed in the cities, they remain unemployed and poor. With development, these groups adapt to their new surroundings as their living conditions become modernized.

It is interesting to observe, however, that despite the theory sub-proletarian conditions persist. In my opinion, Bourdieu was blind to this reality because, theoretically and empirically, he was in this case entirely focused on the pragmatic contexts of social struggle instead of on the universals of capitalist societies. Contexts may differ, but they follow an identical logic. It is surprising that Bourdieu overlooked this connection, given that he himself had discovered something like a 'symbolic DNA' that guarantees and legitimizes the infinite reproduction of social privileges in capitalist societies.

Attention to context is fundamental, since social struggles take place in specific contexts and are intelligible only with regard to them. Bourdieu demonstrates this very convincingly. However, the exclusive attention to context blocks the perception of a universalizing comprehensive logic of hierarchy that varies only in its nuances across societies. While the focus on context allows us to see the subjective consequences of this social-moral system, it blinds us to the system itself – a system that is institutionalized and therefore somewhat independent of specific contexts, even though it exists only in conjunction with them.

The 'contextualized morality' operating in Bourdieu's work, then, is responsible for the lack of a comprehensive reconstruction of the overarching institutionalized moral system. In *Distinction* (1984), he writes about the opposition of soul and body as the foundation of class differences. But he fails to analyze these oppositions as a transcultural hierarchy that operates in all struggles between classes everywhere. This still needs to be done. We need to be able to trace the contextualized aspects of a moral hierarchy within an institutional framework that is valid for all modern capitalist societies, whether central or peripheral. The chapter by Houben

and Rehbein in this volume attempts this, but in a manner that too closely follows Bourdieu's contextualism.

Nevertheless, Bourdieu has developed almost all the instruments necessary for this undertaking. In my view, the formulation of this general logic is fundamental, because only on this basis is it possible to develop a critical theory of modernization that is valid for all parts of the world where capitalist modernization has become institutionalized. Such a formulation would allow us to overcome the circular game that operates between modernization theory – which still dominates academia, the political scene and the 'educated public' – and 'politically correct' practices, which share the same theoretical and meta-theoretical presuppositions. The most important of these is the replacement of class struggle by synthetic accommodating concepts such as nation, culture, region or civilization. In order to show how the general logic of globalizing capitalism implies a global class struggle, it is necessary to reconstruct Bourdieu's contextual point of departure and to then expand it into a more universal dimension – a step which he himself failed to take.

Bourdieu's contextualism is heavily influenced by Max Weber, the most important progenitor of any theory of modernization. However, Weber (1978) also developed the idea that capitalism requires a particular 'ethos', a set of attitudes that are required for any 'successful' action in a capitalist context. Bourdieu's writings about Algeria are basically an exploration of this idea (cf. Rehbein 2007 for Laos). This is a very important consideration, as 'politically correct' approaches to the issue usually disregard the role of this ethos by merely generalizing the liberal *homo oeconomicus*, or they defend oppressed or threatened 'cultures' as if they were not also deeply influenced by it. At the same time as the objective structure becomes hegemonic, the historically relative logic of capitalism is reified and naturalized. Therefore, the greatest challenge for a critical theory with global ambitions is to reconstruct this ethos, the genesis of which has been forgotten or naturalized.

How can we uncover the global logic of a class struggle that is obscured by fragmented and contextualized perception, and which has been transformed into synthetic ideas like nation or culture as guiding principles? In my opinion, we can start by showing that even the class of 'losers', which contrary to Marx is not the working class, and which seems to lie beyond any shared value system, not only functions according to the same logic in both peripheral and central societies but also mirrors – and is oppressed by – the dominant social hierarchy in their daily lives. This is an important observation, because this type of logic also separates central from peripheral countries by means of a naturalized distinction which resembles the same hierarchy. The less developed countries are supposed to be more primitive, corrupt and body-oriented, while the more developed are held to be more sophisticated, morally superior and capable of abstract and universalist thinking. Exactly the same distinctions that separate the higher from the lower classes in any given society also inform global relations between societies and classes.

It is possible to show both empirically and theoretically the ways in which 'global social classes' function (cf. Weiß/Mensah in this volume). In short, these are classes with a common origin and a similar destination. When studying the emergence of these global classes, it is necessary to abandon Bourdieu's focus on context. This focus seems to originate in a conscious decision. Even though Bourdieu acknowledges that there are forms of moral consensus in a society, he seems to advocate a moral perspectivism, possibly in order to denounce the interest-based, instrumental use of morality in the form of symbolic violence. I believe that one does not exclude the other. We can study moral hierarchies that are shared by all and at the same time criticize their role in promulgating symbolic violence. In my view, we

are doomed to study particular contexts precisely because we have failed to examine general, all-encompassing moral hierarchies.

Nobody has reconstructed this underlying moral hierarchy better than Charles Taylor. His book *Sources of the Self* (1992) offers a reconstruction of the moral sociology that informs the entire modern world. Far from being a mere 'history of ideas', this work offers us a genealogy of the social workings of certain 'moral ideas' which have become institutionalized and objectified in various practices without conscious reflection or intention. Thus his argument refers to an empirical and sociological reality – something that any critical sociology which reflects upon its own presuppositions must acknowledge. According to this argument, it was not Plato's work, based on a value hierarchy constructed by the opposition between body and soul, that changed the hearts and minds of people (who for the most part could not even read), but it was Augustine who institutionalized Plato's concept of virtue as a 'practical' path to redemption for every Christian. The link between the hegemonic Western concept of virtue as control of the bodily passions by the soul, and the individual's ideal 'interest' in saving his or her own soul together created the new Western ethos in Weber's sense. The ascetic protestant revolution, according to Taylor, only radicalized the new moral hierarchy and swept away the compromises and doubts that had impeded the effective adaptation of these new ideals in many social contexts. Following in the footsteps of the Catholic Church, the most important institution in the Middle Ages, this same hierarchy was adopted by the fundamental institutions of the new secular world, especially the market and the state – not openly, as in the religious discourse, but in an opaque and implicit manner. If, in the religious context, the control of the soul over the body determined salvation in the next world, in a secularized context the control of the 'mind' or 'soul' over the body's needs determines 'salvation' in this world.

This kind of moral hierarchy has two contributing 'sources' in modernity (similarly, Weber 1978). One amounts to what Taylor has called 'dignity' and the other he dubs 'authenticity' or 'expressivism'. Taylor even talks about a third source, religion, which is not dealt with here. Dignity can be generalized and implies the internalization and embodiment of virtues like discipline, self-control and forethought. To be a productive worker or a good citizen an individual need to have these characteristics. By contrast, authenticity is based in very particular characteristics, and refers to those feelings and needs which are produced by a particular life history. Bourdieu based his whole conceptual framework, developed in his superb work *Distinction* (1984), on these oppositions, focusing on the social distinctions made according to the 'authenticity' divide. The same kind of study could be made in Germany, Brazil or Japan, with very similar results. In our studies of the Brazilian lower classes we have also tried to grasp the nature of 'dignity' as a decisive element in the reproduction of class struggle in a very conservative society.

To avoid misunderstandings, I do want to underline that the world is a rosy reality of sensible behavior and dignity. Quite the opposite. As Bourdieu's ideal of a 'sensible person' was turned into consumerism, dignity is much more a reality by its absence than its presence, as we observed in our earlier study of Brazil's sub-proletarian class. The most important benefit of Taylor's insight into this ambivalent reality of the moral sources of the behavior of men and women in daily life is that Taylor – precisely in order to avoid a 'rosy' vision of the world, but at the same time to be able to capture a moral and symbolic reality which is opaque and only observable in its effects – formulates a significant articulation-inarticulation dialectic. This allows us to refer to a reality which is opaque for the very people who are affected by it.



Using tools such as hermeneutically informed empirical research, for instance, we can ‘articulate’ precisely what is only ‘felt’ by our informants.

How can this talk of an ‘objective morality’ help us to perceive the common logic of symbolic reproduction in modern societies? We are not talking about a ‘morality in heaven’, or any strange notion in a philosopher’s mind. We are talking about a specific moral hierarchy which – more an unconscious and ‘embodied morality’ than a considered and conscious system of ethics – influences our practical life every day in every conceivable dimension. It works as a pattern of social classification which defines ‘virtue’ and is at the same time institutionalized in every fundamental social institution and also exists at the back of our minds, whether consciously or not. It is not only the fact that, in any dimension, the categories of ‘spirit’ are regarded as superior to the categories of the ‘body’ and attract better salaries and recognition, as the whole functioning of the market and the state testifies. The same hierarchy also inhabits our inner selves and dictates what we should feel ‘objectively’, whether we like it or not.

In our previous hermeneutic and empirical research on the lower classes in Brazil, we stressed the question of ‘dignity’ much more than that of ‘authenticity’. Dignity is the immediate issue at stake for these classes. They are constructed by the lack of economic capital and the more recognized forms of cultural capital. In its more recognized forms, cultural capital is a paramount example of the embodiment of ‘soul’ or ‘spirit’, that is, of virtue and all the privileges that come with it.

The democratizing force of capitalism lies in the increased access to ‘knowledge’ and to numerous forms of cultural capital, involving more people, than was the case in traditional societies. Cultural capital – and economic capital as well – are passed on from one generation to the next as family heritage – just as in any non-modern society, only in a much more opaque manner. However, not all individuals and classes have the same access to cultural capital. What Taylor calls the punctual self – the capacity to constantly remodel oneself, through discipline and self-control, to meet the exigencies of the market and the state – is embodied in a specific class, the bourgeoisie. In societies that have managed to generalize or democratize this bourgeois habitus, the principle of equality before the law is institutionalized to a greater degree than in others – albeit always incompletely. The punctual self is also the basis for the concepts of the productive individual and citizenship. Bringing these principles out into the open contributes to our understanding of the opaque and implicit mechanisms that inform social classification. It helps us understand the opaque ‘symbolic operators’ that allow us in everyday life to hierarchize and classify people, as more or less valuable or important, as worthy of respect or contempt.

The punctual self is not spread evenly in all classes. The presupposed ‘dignity’, which is an important aspect of this self, is acquired to different degrees by different classes. It is a prerequisite for self-respect and social recognition in any modern capitalist context. Beyond the arena of class struggle, which is concerned with differential access to scarce goods and resources, there is a realm ‘beneath’ dignity – a realm which characterizes the lives of a considerable proportion of the world’s population.

Although the class living ‘beneath dignity’ is comparatively small in the countries of the center, it continues to grow. In Brazil, it comprises a third of the population; in many African countries it is two thirds at least. The fragmentary, contextualized, theoretically unsound and empirically superficial discourse about the sub-proletarian classes has prevented us from perceiving their global and universal characteristics. What I provocatively call the ‘underclass’ is the class that lacks access to the types of capital necessary for the incorporation

of the modern idea of 'soul', that is, dignity. This group exists globally and constitutes one of the most numerous of all classes.

### **The Case of Brazil**

In an empirical study of the Brazilian underclass (Souza 2009), our research team looked at the relationship between the 'material' dimension (socio-economic poverty) and the 'symbolic' dimension (the permanent effects of social disrecognition) of deprivation in Brazil. In the following paragraphs, I present a few results from this earlier study that are of relevance to the general argument outlined in the preceding section. Usually in such cases, we merely perceive the material aspects of poverty and disregard the symbolic reality, an approach which legitimizes and stabilizes this condition. Both realities are inseparable. At the same time, they are analytically different. We have to grasp their relationship in order to understand the phenomenon of poverty in modern societies, which in reality is a phenomenon relating to a specific inequality.

In order to understand the symbolic dimension of social exclusion and the persistence of material, existential and political deprivation, I propose a theoretical framework that draws on both Bourdieu and Taylor. It is only the symbolic legitimation of inequality that makes it acceptable and its reproduction possible. As there is little comprehension of this 'invisible' symbolic reality, the investigator finds himself tilting at windmills, a reaction compounded by the fragmented perception of social reality. One example is the treatment of the underclass in the media. Crime has become a media spectacle, while the violence lying at its roots is not discussed. Poverty has once again become an issue for policing, not for politics. The poor are considered responsible for their own lot. This perception seems to be a global tendency.

In this regard, the study of the mechanism of social exclusion of large segments of the population in countries like Brazil may contribute to understanding the same issue in countries of the center, where the proportion of excluded groups is smaller. In terms of 'quality', however, the process of social exclusion and marginalization does not differ between Brazil and Germany (cf. Wacquant in this volume). This process is based on 'modern' motives. It is the lack of modern, impersonal types of capital, especially economic and cultural capital, that reduces the persons concerned to mere 'bodies', which are sold on at low prices to deliver services that are socially despised. Typically, the men do dirty and heavy work, while the women do domestic and sexual work. These are people who have failed to incorporate the 'knowledge' necessary for success in competitive markets. As a result of this lack, they live in a precarious symbolic and political reality, a realm 'below dignity' in Taylor's sense.

All over the world, the reality of the underclass is rendered invisible by the same forces: on the one hand, the liberal conception of society, which universalizes the middle class habitus and extends it to the underclasses, who can thereby be blamed for their failures; and, on the other hand, the notion of 'political correctness', which takes the discourse of the underclass itself at face value. The concept of 'political correctness' is particularly dangerous because it considers itself critical and progressive. However, the description by the socially excluded of his or her own situation is necessarily reactive. One tends to subjectively deny the sub-human conditions in which one's life objectively takes place. Achieving a reflexive distance from one's own situation is possible only for persons who have the means to change it. Those who lack access to different options are left with no option but to deny or euphemize their reality, as Bourdieu (1979) has shown with regard to Algeria. However, in most studies of the

excluded, inside and outside Brazil, this reality is not acknowledged and the 'politically correct' perspective is unconsciously adopted (cf. Lahire 2003).

In our research, conducted in several regions of Brazil between 2005 and 2008, we applied a method based on Bourdieu's studies in Algeria (1979) and Lahire's studies in France (2003). We eventually developed a method on our own which comprised sequential interviews with the same individuals. This allowed us to deal with their natural 'resistance' to our questions and to explore the same issues in increasing depth, rather than focusing on different issues in each interview as Lahire had done. The informants were chosen according to a typology developed during the process. Usually, in the first interview informants would present their family life as an idyll. In succeeding interviews, inconsistencies appeared and deeper inquiry into certain issues became possible. Caring and loving parents turned into sexually abusive and mostly absent fathers and instrumental mothers. Self-reflexive and critical discussion of the interviews enabled us to reveal and assess these inconsistencies. On this basis, we were able to reconstruct the inner logic of living in conditions of extreme social exclusion in Brazil. A core component of this inner logic is the reproduction of the 'de-structured' family, something to which the dominant discourse is blind. The naturalization of sexual abuse by the elders in the family – especially against girls, but also against boys – shocked everyone in our research team. This issue is a taboo that never appears in the media. It is part of a universal instrumental attitude held towards all other parties, including within the family, pervasive in this class. Florestan Fernandes had already pointed to this phenomenon in a study conducted in São Paulo during the 1950s. It is not hard to imagine the kind of wounds this practice – handed on from generation to generation and covered by a tacit understanding between victim and perpetrator – inflicts on the self-respect of members of the underclass. The model of the bourgeois family, with its stress on mutual obligations, is reproduced only to a very limited degree here. Axel Honneth (1994) has stressed the importance of affective and emotional relations within the family for the exercise of any kind of public role with a minimum of competence. The complete social and political neglect of these families existing in a mode of exclusion seems to be a decisive factor in the reproduction of this class.

Another important issue is the lack of fundamental capabilities for acquiring cultural capital of any kind. Many of our informants referred to school. However, often this information included reports of children staring at the blackboard for hours on end, without learning anything. As this type of report was frequently repeated, we began to understand that these children had failed to internalize the ability to 'concentrate' – an ability that members of the middle classes usually regard as a 'natural' given, as if one was born with it. However, as there were no effective examples in the families we studied, children of this class failed to develop this disposition. Even in more structured families of the underclass, in which parents remained a couple and tried to implement a caring and affectionate relationship with their children, we observed traces of social neglect. As the children had never seen their parents read but only do manual labour, and as they never interacted with written material at home, their success at school was expected to be limited. And what good would mother's admonitions to study do if the mother herself had no formal education?

In our interaction with the interviewees, it became evident that the discourse had very little effect on individuals or prospects for social change. Rather, practices serving as examples seemed to be the only effective instruments of change. The construction of Taylor's 'punctual self' is restricted from the outset, since the 'moral and emotional economy' which is supposed to be incorporated during the socialization process is almost completely lacking in some classes. Without discipline, self-control and forward thinking, the socially produced ability to

'concentrate' fails to be incorporated, first in the school and then in the ongoing learning process which is an increasing presupposition of modern economies everywhere. These deficits help to explain why this entire class has been 'ruled out of competition' for participation in any formal or valued dimension of the market, and is instead relegated to 'muscular', 'sexual' or other kinds of heavy, dirty and low-status work purchased cheaply by the privileged classes.

School as an institution is irrelevant in this context because the children already start school as 'losers', while middle-class children, on the basis of effective examples and incentives, begin as 'winners'. What is more, the public education system – which has become increasingly precarious, not only in Brazil but also in countries of the center – promises salvation through education, but in reality translates social neglect into individual failure. With the state's seal and society's agreement, school officially labels underclass children as stupid and lazy. Many adolescents from the underclass who we interviewed perceived themselves as incapable of concentration and stupid. And they considered this to be their own fault. School is part of an intersubjective context of face-to-face interaction and institutions that incessantly reconfirm that the existentially and economically deprived class is in fact worthless. Their exclusion is thus objectified and naturalized.

The same context explains the political impotence of the underclass. Our study discovered a dividing line between the so-called 'honest poor', who are willing to sell their muscle power for little reward, and the 'delinquents' who react against the structure that condemns them. In no other social class is this dividing line so pronounced as in the underclass. The everyday drama unfolding in the majority of the underclass families we studied is focussed on the issue of 'honesty'. The realm of 'honesty' is reckoned to be a safe haven in a sea of delinquency, prostitution, alcohol and drugs.

The issue of honesty constitutes a division in the underclass that renders internal solidarity within this negatively privileged class difficult. Practically every family that we studied comprised some 'delinquent' members. And we came across many cases in which mothers were willing to exploit their daughters economically and at the same time condemned them for their immoral conduct as prostitutes; or where brothers stopped talking to each other because they had chosen different options regarding honesty. The dominant moral hierarchy, with the concept of 'dignity' at its core, blames the assumed lack of dignity on the individual and thus divides the entire class, as well as each family and each neighbourhood, into irreconcilable foes (cf. Wacquant in this volume).

Brazil also contains another class that we tried to research and understand (Souza 2010). In the terms of the conservative public debate on Brazilian society, it is known as the 'new middle class', in order to convey the idea that Brazil, as a result of significant economic growth in recent years, is rapidly becoming a 'first world' society where the middle classes and not the poor make up the most significant part of the population. According to our study, however, this 'new middle class' more closely resembles a new kind of 'post-Fordist working class' – a typical product of the new worldwide hegemony of financial capitalism. The need to reduce the costs of projects, and the control and supervision of workers, coupled with new strategies to speed up the circulation of capital, has led to the constitution of a new kind of 'working class' without factories or supervisors.

Of course, the traditional Fordist working class still exists, though under increasingly precarious social and political conditions. But the newfound strength of the Brazilian internal market has resulted from the upward social mobility of 35 million people – out of a global population of almost 400 million, mostly Chinese (Lamounier and Souza 2010) – who work,

autonomously or not, in small firms, factories and family enterprises, engaged in a variety of small-scale production. They earn between 700 and 2.500 dollars a month and are the chief engine of Brazil's recent economic development. Although they have become major consumers of automobiles – something that in Brazil had been the privilege of the 'true' middle class – their way of life is typical of a new kind of working class.

These are people who work 10 to 14 hours a day and believe they are autonomous and independent producers. They have a comparatively small amount of cultural and economic capital and mostly work under conditions which suggest a lack of legal protection and without paying taxes of any kind. They are also mostly individuals with two jobs, or people who work by day and study at night. In this kind of informal market, the creation of autonomous organizations bound together by common interests is almost ruled out, since class solidarity is not at stake here.

What seems to separate this group from the sub-proletarians discussed above is their adherence to a solid 'work ethic', due mostly to family background and religious socialization, whether experienced early or late. In the cities, religious socialization occurs mostly later in life and, in the great majority of cases, reflects the influence of Pentecostalism. We also found people here who had come up from 'below' – from the sub-proletarian stratum – and who had been able to break the vicious circle of unstructured family life and precarious work conditions. As with the Brazilian sub-proletarians proper, this class should not be conceived as a 'national' class, but one which is spreading worldwide. In these groups, finance capitalism seems to have found its ideal 'supporting class', as Max Weber would say, especially in heavily populated countries like China, India, Brazil and Russia, lacking strong traditions of working-class struggle and with vast numbers of people willing to work hard in any conditions. Insofar as 'dignity' is concerned, this class seems to mark the new dividing line for contemporary capitalism.

The most significant finding from our research is the demonstration that, even in the study of social classes that seem to be 'typical' of peripheral capitalism, we find all the classifying or de-classifying mechanisms which are at work in modern capitalist societies. For a critical sociology which seeks to unmask opaque patterns of domination – and a sociology which validates the concept of 'national culture' is one of the most important of these masks – this is indeed a major challenge.

## **Conclusion**

A common theoretical framework for societies of the periphery and the center has two advantages. First, the implicit 'racism' of any essentializing division between arbitrarily constructed oppositions can be overcome. If, for example, we talk about 'personalized' societies, as the modernization theories discussed in the first section do, we necessarily posit an opposition to supposedly corruption-free societies. Quantitative differences – which certainly do exist – tacitly mutate into qualitative differences. All of a sudden, we are forming images in our minds of people who are dirty, lazy and untrustworthy by nature. This way of thinking is shared by a global consensus based on 'common sense' and by the media. It is, incidentally, the very presence of this widely shared, though unarticulated, understanding which has produced this global media in the first place. Afghanis and Iraqis can die by the thousands without arousing the emotions of the 'civilized' media. If a few American or German soldiers die in combat, however, a politic 'theater' of mourning has to be observed. In the same way, Brazilians of the underclass kill each other or are killed by the police on a daily basis, without stirring the emotions of the Brazilian middle classes. The lack of recognition is

the same in both cases and is based on the same process and the same rationale. It is a process that is reconfirmed in conservative academic productions that reflect the values of the dominant politico-cultural ethos.

The second advantage of this new framework lies in the possibilities it offers for comparison and learning. While conventional theories of modernization can be criticized on a number of grounds, they are right when they argue that some societies are better – more just or more humane – than others. Conventional theories are flawed because they equate the abstract notion of the ‘good’ or the ‘just’ with North Atlantic societies – with the US in the first place – and especially their middle classes. I have tried to demonstrate that this equation is both ‘provincial’ and theoretically unsound. On the other hand, we also have to contend with the ‘political correctness’ of theories which necessarily operate with a ‘better/worse’ bias which is never admitted. In reality, we judge everything and everyone in terms of these opposed categories all the time. We can do so either implicitly – as in the great majority of the cases claimed to be founded on ‘science’ – or explicitly. I believe that is always better to make these judgments explicitly, and show the reasons for doing so. The ways in which societies treat their underclasses and underprivileged in general, and the extent to which they explicitly allow social conflicts to be thematized and debated openly in the public realm, perhaps constitute a suitable starting point for a critical and comparative sociology of (all) modern societies.

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