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Rethinking the city with Bourdieu's trialectic

Loïc Wacquant

My forthcoming book Bourdieu in the City: Challenging Urban Theory (Cambridge, Polity Press, 2023) is not intended as an eclectic combination of the structuralist and the phenomenological takes on the city rehearsing Pierre Bourdieu's influential critique of the deadly antinomy of objectivism and subjectivism. Nor does it aim just to make room for the author of Distinction in the pantheon of theorists before which students of the city are expected to genuflect. I intend the book, not as an addition, but a challenge to the urban canon and a springboard for a possible reconstruction of urban theory and inquiry around what I christen the Bourdieusian trialectic of symbolic space, social space, and physical space. In this paper, I provide a compact characterization of the trialectic and then draw out its implications for the theory and comparative study of the city.

Bourdieu's trialectic

By *symbolic space*, the Bourdieu of *Language and Symbolic Power* ([1982] 1991) refers to the topography of cognitive categories through which we cut up the empirical manifold and classify people, places, objects, and activities. These mental grids (captured, in their simplest form, by interdependent dualities such as masculine/feminine, high/low, right/left, active/passive, public/private, etc.) mold our way of thinking, feeling, and acting: sedimented inside the body, they are constitutive of *habitus* and thus they carry our history,

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individual and collective. They are endowed with authority and potency to the extent that they are sponsored by paramount symbolic agencies such as the state, religion, science, politics, and the law, and/or subtended by the 'natural attitude' of everyday life dear to Alfred Schutz as a result of shared socialization, social ceremonies, and rites of institution.¹ Crucially, the cognitive categories that serve to map the world are not transcendental universals—as with Immanuel Kant and the classical neo-Kantians—but historical forms resulting from classification struggles inscribed in bodies and institutions (Bourdieu 1979, 543–585, 1980b, 1997, ch. 4).

By *social space*, the Bourdieu of *Distinction* (1979) means the multidimensional distribution of agents in objective positions defined by the allocation of efficient resources or *capital*, economic, cultural, social and symbolic, for the generic species (which can be further specified depending on the field or subfield, e.g. bureaucratic versus intellectual capital in the academic field). For purposes of theoretical parsimony, these multiple dimensions can be collapsed into the two axes of total volume of capital (in its different pertinent forms) and composition of capital (especially the relative weight of economic and cultural capital), with a third axis capturing changes over time in capital volume and composition. On my reading, social space is the generic 'mother category' out of which emerges the more specific concept of *field*, as a specialized social space characterized by differentiation, autonomization, a bipolar organization, and the monopolization of specific authority (Wacquant and Akçaoğlu 2017, 262–64 and Wacquant 2019). The cleavages of social space materialize the hierarchy and force of competing social 'principles of vision and division,' such as class, ethnicity, gender, nationality, citizenship, etc., which serve as basis for strategies of group-making and claims-making.

As for *physical space*, tackled by Bourdieu early in *The Ball of Bachelors* ([1962] 2002) and *Uprooting* (Bourdieu and Sayad 1964) and late in *The Weight of the World* (Bourdieu et al. 1993) and *The Social Structures of the Economy* (2000), it designates the bounded, three-dimensional material expanse within which agents and institutions are geographically situated and their actions 'take place,' in the literal sense of happening and occupying a certain locus and a definite volume. An empirical concretization is the built environment of a city, with its infrastructure, buildings, passageways, public spaces, etc., which acts as the hard container and pivot of the species of capital unequally distributed (social space) among the different salient social categories of people (symbolic space). Physical space enters critically into the formula of action, then, not just through the material constraints it imposes and facilitations it allows, but also as the space of concretization of mental categories (as when the image of the city in the mind of the dominant becomes topographic and architectural reality) and social divisions (as when the partitions of social space become separate neighborhoods).²

Each of these spaces is 'thick' with its specific history, concretized by arrangements of cognitive schemata, distributions of capital, and the city's evolving landscape, as well as with the history of its relationships with the other two. For each space is at once a *product*, a *stake*, and a *weapon in historical struggles* for the appropriation of material and symbolic goods. *Product*: take classification systems such as the ethnic taxonomies used by the state in the US; they result

from battles for the recognition and institutionalization of certain categories and the erasure of others, as shown by Cristina Mora (2014) in her masterful study of the invention of the Hispanics in and after the 1970s. *Stake*: these same taxonomies are the targets of strategies of conservation or subversion, as when members of particular populations—say, Americans of mixed descent or black French people—fight for acknowledgment by the state and visibility in national culture (DaCosta 2007; Ndiaye 2008). *Weapon*: mobilization based on existing ethnic categorization in the political field allows different populations to make claims for public and private resources, such as protected, preferential, or remedial access to education, jobs, and the vote, as with affirmative action programs in the Soviet Union, India, and the United States (Martin 2001; Weisskopf 2004).

Similarly, the physical structure of a city is the layered *product* of past contests over place, including battles between proponents of market value versus use value (Logan and Molotch [1987] 2007), waged in social space: think of segregated neighborhoods as the sedimented product of historical discrimination in housing and of the projection of past class struggles onto the topography of housing. It is the *stake* of continuing contention over the distribution of people and goods across areas, as illustrated by battles over gentrification, land use, or infrastructural projects. And the geographic layout is a *weapon* that can be unsheathed to facilitate or hinder strategies of closure, negatively, as with the use of natural and man-made obstacles to corral undesirable populations and activities, and, positively, as when physical propinquity and geographically dense webs of institutions facilitate collective mobilization and group-making in social space.³

At the topological level, then, social life according to Bourdieu can be dissected by tracing the *mutual projection and dynamic transposition of one space into the other two*:

The structure of social space thus manifests itself, in the most diverse contexts, in the form of spatial oppositions, inhabited (or appropriated) space functioning as a sort of spontaneous symbolization of social space. There is no space, in a hierarchical society, that is not hierarchized and which does not express social hierarchies and distances in a more or less distorted or euphemized fashion, especially through the *effect of naturalization* associated with the durable inscription of social realities onto and in the physical world. Differences produced by social logics can then be seen to arise out of the nature of things (think of the notion of 'natural frontier' or that of 'natural area' dear to the early Chicago School). (Bourdieu 1993a, 160)

The structure of the spatial distribution of capitals at any moment records the balance of social struggles over what Bourdieu (1993a, 164) calls 'the profits of space,' including benefits derived from location, rank in a hierarchical structure of places, and occupancy. These geographic struggles in space and over space are waged individually (as with residential mobility) and collectively (through political contests over housing, municipal services, or environmental policy, for instance).

All three spaces are necessarily implicated in social action and, like tectonic plates, they constantly rub on each other. Thinking in terms of spaces, plural, invites us to *think relationally* or, better, *topologically*⁴ by tracing the layered

connections between the different elements constitutive of a mental, social, and geographic structure. Rather than postulate a perfect homology between these three structures, as Émile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss ([1903] 2017) do in their classic 1903 essay on 'Primitive Forms of Classification,' Bourdieu gives us for mandate to investigate the varying replications, distortions, gaps, and disarticulations that emerge between them as a result of struggles *within* each of these three spaces and *across* them, aiming to preserve or transform the historical state of their correspondences—ranging from perfect isomorphism to complete disjuncture.

Thus Bourdieu (1993a, 160) notes that 'social space retranslates itself into physical space but always in a manner that is more or less *scrambled*' (*brouillée*). He also insists that the mapping of symbolic space onto social space, making possible shared identity and igniting group formation, is never perfect due to the *semantic elasticity of social reality*: 'The social world may be uttered and constructed in different ways according to different principles of vision and division—for example, economic divisions and ethnic divisions' (Bourdieu [1982] 1991, 19), and the relative potency of these principles is at stake within reality itself. *In nuce*, the French sociologist invites us to hold together in our analysis the cognitive categories of agents, the position they occupy in a multidimensional stratification order, and their place in and peregrinations across the cityscape.

Habitus and field in the urban crucible

The concrete manifestations of Bourdieu's trialectic take a variety of historical forms situated on a *continuum from perfect homology*, at one end, to *complete disjuncture*, at the other, with most empirical cases falling somewhere in between, by virtue of *relative autonomy and thus inertia of each of the three spaces*. The two extremes of perfect homology and complete disarticulation are *logical* constructs that cannot be fully manifested in *historical* reality. Trialectical homologies are wont to be imperfect to some degree given the 'semantic elasticity' of social space, the relative rigidity of physical space, and the fact that symbolic space is organized by practical categories that are themselves fuzzy and invoked according to a practical logics that escape abstract logic.⁵ Likewise, complete disarticulation is an impossibility—except perhaps in situation of total sociosymblic scrambling such as a civil war, and even then—as any social universe is minimally anchored in physical space and spawns symbolic categories expressing its conformation to some extent.

The relative autonomy of symbolic space arises with the emergence, consolidation, and self-referential character of fields of cultural production (religion, art, science, law, journalism, politics, etc.) wherein symbolic forms are elaborated by specialists according to internal criteria (Bourdieu 1994). Think, for instance, how the law becomes disembedded from everyday life and monopolized by jurists who develop legal codes according to specifically legal rules (Bourdieu 1986). The relative autonomy of social space comes from the laws of the accumulation, differentiation, and transmission of capitals permitted by the existing instruments of social reproduction and conversion

(Bourdieu 1989, 386–396, 2022, 394–407). The inertia of physical space inheres in the material constraints it poses and the facilitations it grants for location, position, and movement and in the expense in capital, labor, and time required to transform it.

We can do more and better than simply add Bourdieu to the canon of urban studies and plug this or that concept of his into a research project. We can deploy the trialectic of symbolic, social, and physical space as a framework to rearticulate the core problems of urban studies. Accordingly, let me essay here a provisional précis for a neo-Bourdieuian urban theory inviting us to *rethink the city as the crucible for distinctive formations of capital and habitus*. On the side of institutions, or history objectified, the metropolis is a distinctive milieu in that it fosters

1. the *accumulation and concentration of capitals, plural*, via the attraction of human, material, and symbolic resources within its boundaries (well described by Max Weber ([1921] 1958) in his study of the genesis of the medieval city and Charles Tilly (1989) in his account of the correlated ascent of cities and economic capital in the second European millenium);
2. the *diversification of capital* into different competing forms, economic, political, religious, juridical, etc., as functional differentiation takes hold, leading to the accretion of institutions specifically tasked with the reproduction of the different species and their holders (as illustrated by Durkheim's (1983) account of the division of labor and Bourdieu's (2012) correlative rendering of the rise of the state as holder of 'meta-capital');
3. the *contestation of capital by capital*, which arises out of the very fact of diversification: the physical co-presence of multiple species of capital in the same compact social and physical space raises in an acute form the question of their relative value and hierarchy, and thus sets off battles for primacy among the holders of diverse capitals, in addition to challenges from below by those deprived of capital (as proposed by Bourdieu (2011) in his account of the 'division of the labor of domination' and the genesis of the 'field of power').

On the side of dispositions, or history incarnate, the city is similarly distinctive in that it brings into close, ongoing, contact populations of varied provenances, life experiences and activities, and thus varied subjectivities. It fosters not just *positional* mobility across physical and social space, but also *dispositional mobility* via

4. the *proliferation of a wide gamut of diverse habitus* rooted in dense and distinct constellations of social relations and cultural values that have passed a critical demographic threshold such that they can endure and thrive (as proposed by Claude Fischer's (1995) subcultural theory of urbanism building on Louis Wirth's (1938) classic statement on 'urbanism as a way of life');
5. the formation of *loosely integrated and disadjusted habitus* due, again, to the dispersion of social experiences and contacts, and to the disjuncture between disposition and position (of the kind dissected by Bourdieu (1977) in his study of the social drift of the Algerian subproletariat, plunged in the rational

and market-based world of the city with village categories rooted in honor and kinship);

6. the *collision of variegated habitus* inconsistent or incongruent with one another in social and physical space, leading, again, to existential anxiety, strategic innovation, and moments of self-interrogation (as argued by Georg Simmel [1903/1950, 326], for whom living in the metropolis is characterized by ‘mental predominance through the intensification of consciousness’).

In short, the city is a universe that fosters, not just Marxian exploitation, Durkheimian specialization, Weberian rationalization, and Du Boisian divisions of (dis)honor, but also *Bourdieuian reflexivity* by exposing its residents to a wide array of practices and criteria of social valuation that relativizes their own both objectively and subjectively.⁶ Over the long run, due to the cultural and social churning it fosters, *urbanization is a solvent of doxa, capital-D*, and the ferment for the emergence of *distinct doxai* (the plural of doxa) specific to the microcosms that coalesce in the city. It follows that ‘urbanizing’ Bourdieu by bringing the city into his theoretical model as correlate of social differentiation strengthens his account of structure (fields) but unsettles his account of action (habitus), and thus invites us to better specify the conditions under which habitus and world come to agree (or not) with one another.

Neo-Bourdieuian principles for the study of the city

How does adopting the neo-Bourdieuian framework whose principles are sketched above change the ways we study urban inequality in general, and articulate comparative research designs in particular? Let me flag five distinctive features, pegged at a level of abstraction high enough to allow them to travel across time periods, nations and regions of the world. First, the social science of the city must be *epistemically reflexive*, which means that it must break with common sense (ordinary, scholarly, and policy), starting with the ‘social problems’ vision of the urban promoted by city managers and unthinkingly adopted by too many scholars; self-consciously forge its analytic concepts, and ensure that these are semantically clear, logically coherent, and empirically heuristic (rather than fashionable); and articulate its own problematic rather than borrow it prefabricated from urban reality.⁷ It begins by questioning the questions, querying the categories, and scrutinizing data sources and preassembled databases (for instance, it contests the identification of the urban with administrative city limits, an elementary move that is too rarely made because it is inconvenient).

But reflexive does not mean *scholastic*: for Bourdieu, social theory is not the subject of solipsistic contemplation and discursive disquisition with other ‘paper theories,’ but an instrument for producing new empirical objects.⁸ Social science ‘consists in breaking preconstructed objects, reconstructing things badly constructed’ (Bourdieu 2015, 510). An illustration: before asking how the key urban concepts of eviction, segregation, suburbs, violence, and gentrification can be adapted to foster inquiry into the cities of the global South (Garrido, Ren, and Weinstein 2021), ask whether they are robust and valid for the cities of the global North to start with. Take segregation: it conflates a state and a process,

spatial differentiation with spatial closure, result and action, and typically omits the segregator from the equation.

Second, Bourdieu urges us to include in the sociology of the city the varied viewpoints, categories of perception, and representations that steer agents in their individual and collective strategies through a *double move*, namely, *to demarcate and repatriate*. This is because the urban world consists, not just of material distribution of resources and forces in geographic space, but also of symbolic classifications that guide urbanites in their everyday round as well as propel them during critical phases of concerted action—Bourdieu (1980a) refers to that symbolic dimension as ‘the objectivity of the second order.’ Urban sociology must thus proceed through a double break: in a first phase, *demarcate* by sweeping aside ordinary perceptions and prevalent representations to construct an objective map of the positions occupied by agents; in a second phase, *repatriate* these representations, not as the spawn of free-floating subjectivities, but as views taken from definite points occupied in the space of positions constructed (Bourdieu 1989). This double move enables us to transcend the opposition between objectivist and subjectivist modes of urban analysis (say, the political economy of place versus the phenomenology of everyday life) by treating these two dimensions of social life as two *moments* of one and the same social analysis.

Next, give pride of place to symbolic power, as wielded by specialists in cultural production, who elaborate and diffuse authoritative mental constructs, and experienced by urbanites as they navigate the landscape of the city and imbibe the representations that organize it. Starting with symbolic power, Bourdieu's trademark concept, also means *starting with the study of the state* as the paramount material and symbolic agency that sets out the broader parameters of physical, social, and symbolic space in the city by

- (i) laying down infrastructure, shaping and regulating the built environment, tracing its concrete divisions, and creating the material conditions for the efficacy and fluidity of capital in all of its forms;
- (ii) distributing endowments in capitals and facilitating or hindering their accumulation and transmission—via income support, taxation, laws of inheritance, and policies toward labor, firms, and housing (on the side of economic capital), via schooling, certification, and the allocation of cultural amenities (on the side of cultural capital);
- (iii) imprinting categories of perception of urban reality (such as expectations of anonymity, safety, and civility, ethnic labels, and mental maps of neighborhoods) while fostering or hindering the concentration and operation of rival symbolic agencies in the city, politics, religion, science, law, and journalism.

The state must thus be envisioned as a *classifying and stratifying machine* that shapes urban inequality and marginality upstream rather than as just a social ambulance that reacts to them downstream. Among the agencies of the state, special attention needs to be paid to the police, the courts (criminal, family, and housing), and the jail are core urban institutions that supervise and channel the life strategies of dispossessed and dishonored populations.

Here I must stress that the concept of bureaucratic field implies that, far from being an omniscient, omnipotent, and unified entity, the *state itself is a stake as well as a space of struggles*, internal and external. Struggles *internal* to the bureaucratic field include *vertical* struggles between the high and the low state nobility (policy-makers versus street-level bureaucrats), and *horizontal* struggles between the Left hand and the Right hand (social protection and welfare succor versus fiscal discipline and penal sanction). *External* struggles operate at two levels: in the higher region of social space, they pit state officials with other protagonists in the field of power, politicians, corporations, jurists, scientists, religious authorities, etc.; in the lower region, they entangle the managers and executants of public bureaucracies with the gamut of specialized professions concerned with urban space (property and business owners, developers, architects, housing associations, etc.) as well as with social activists and residents making claims on behalf of categories shorn of economic and cultural capital—though the latter are typically marginal players, like the populations they claim to represent. The positional marginality of ‘community based organizations’ in the urban field of power—in which they exist and endure at the sufferance of the local state and so-called philanthropies—is too often masked by the methodological populism of the scholars who study them ‘from below’ and from within in the American metropolis.

Fourth, a neo-Bourdieuian approach to the metropolis stipulates that the analyst must *think geometrically* and take in *the entire span of social space* and not isolate this or that region of it. This carries the mandate to connect analytically the sociopolitical production of neighborhoods of relegation and of enclaves of privilege; and, when these are distant spatially and phenomenologically, as they are wont to be in the Western metropolis, to trace how this disconnection is (re)produced—by market mechanisms, ecological design, physical obstacles, policy decisions, policing, etc., and with what effects. Three patterns may be provisionally distinguished: dual cleavage, checkerboard, and interspersion.

Fifth, a neo-Bourdieuian take on the city is *agonistic*: it put *struggles in and over space* at its analytic epicenter. Symbolic space, social space, and physical space are historical constructs, born of the battles waged by agents situated in these very spaces, endowed with different volumes and composition of capital, seeking to preserve or transform the shape and articulations of these three spaces. Of particular pertinence are the symbolic struggles over the vision and division of the city, which shape how key actors, state officials, business elites, juridical agents, activist associations, and ordinary citizens experience, mold, and navigate the urban struggles in which social scientists themselves are caught *nolens volens*.

Lastly, with the concept of habitus, Bourdieu enables us to travel all the way down the analytic ladder to study the patterned practices, representations, and emotions of people at ground level. Habitus, defined as acquired, durable and transposable inclinations to act, think, and feel in definite ways (including symbolic divisions deposited inside the body), invites us to historicize the capacities and strategies of agents, how they perceive social topology and geography, and how they put together lines of action that mesh to reproduce or transform the geometry of mental categories, social locations, and places in the city. It enables us to reintroduce the mundane everyday into urban sociology

without giving up structural analysis (Leitner, Peck and Sheppard 2019, 12), indeed to join the political economy undergirding the trialectic with the social pragmatics unfolding at ground level. For disposition is not action; rather, it is *the coupling of disposition and position* (that is, location in an allotment in capitals) that is the principle of the symbolic, social, and spatial strategies of individuals, households, and groups.

The reader will have noted that these recommendations pertain to the conduct of social inquiry in general, regardless of its object. Indeed, with the trialectic, Bourdieu invites us to *merge urban studies into a broader topological science* of the dynamic relations between symbolic, social, and physical space wherever they take place—in urban, suburban and rural areas—and at the gamut of scales, local (a street corner, a neighborhood), city and regional (a metropolis), national and global (a network of cities).

Notes

- 1 A concrete example of a symbolic structure is the ethnoracial taxonomy (white, black, Hispanic, Asian, Native American, etc.) with which Americans learn to categorize one another and the state categorizes them. It resides at once in the objectivity of official classifications (such as those used by the Census, schools, hospitals, etc.) and in the subjectivity of everyday typologies. Another is the implicit map of neighborhoods and their perceived properties that people carry in their head as they move in and across the city.
- 2 This twofold projection of mental and social categories onto geography is particularly visible in colonial cities. A paradigmatic demonstration of the stubborn *remanence of appropriated physical space* is Zeynep Çelik's (1997) rich historical study of the architecture of Algiers as both reflective and constitutive of colonial confrontation across thirteen decades.
- 3 The negative trialectic of symbolic, social, and physical space is at work in the erection of the ghetto as instrument of ethnic ostracization (Drake and Cayton [1945] 1993), the positive trialectic in the creation of upper-class enclaves and gated communities (Holmqvist 2017; Low 2004). Wacquant (2010a) sketches a model of urban seclusion that brings these two dynamics together.
- 4 Topology is the mathematical study of the formal properties of geometric configurations. Bourdieu (1989, 16) notes that 'sociology, in its objectivist moment, is a social topology, an *analysis situs* as they called this new branch of mathematics in Leibniz's time, an analysis of relative positions and of the objective relations between these positions.'
- 5 This is argued theoretically in 'The Logic of Practice' (Bourdieu 1980a, 135–165) and demonstrated empirically in 'The Demon of Analogy' (Bourdieu 1980a, 333–439).
- 6 The formation of enclaves or clusters rooted in ethnonational and ethnoreligious affinity aims to minimize such exposure and to protect the mental and symbolic integrity of the group. This is demonstrated by Drake and Cayton in *Black Metropolis* (Drake and Cayton [1945] 1993) for blacks, Humbert Nelli in *Italians in Chicago, 1880–1930* (1973) for white migrants into the Windy City, and Lepoutre and Cannoodt's (2005) *Souvenirs de familles immigrées* (Lepoutre and Cannoodt 2005) in the case of immigrants into the housing estates of the French urban periphery.
- 7 A compact argument on how to craft robust social science concepts in this vein is Wacquant (2022, 151–153). For a case illustration, see how Bourdieu (2000) reconstructs the commonsensical policy question of home-ownership into the scientific problematic of the state production of both the supply and the demand for single-family homes and of the political ramifications of the ensuing morphological consolidation and economic insecurity of the petty bourgeoisie that is the primary target and spawn of this policy.
- 8 For Bourdieu (2015, 207, 206), theory is best understood as 'a system of schemata of scientific construction of reality' and concepts as 'stenography for a series of practical operations.'

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