

SOME REMARKS ON THE CONDITIONS AND RESULTS OF A COLLECTIVE INTERNATIONAL COMPARATIVE RESEARCH ENTERPRISE

Introduced by Johan Heilbron

Among the early but rarely noted topics addressed in Pierre Bourdieu's work is the tension between the crucial role of comparative research and the enormous difficulties of its practical realization. In *The Craft of Sociology* (or. 1968, tr. 1991), Bourdieu, Chamboredon, and Passeron state that the specificity of sociology as a science is that "it can only constitute its object by the comparative approach" (1991 [1968]).

However, rather than simply compare particular social groups or specific institutions with each another, according to Bourdieu comparative analysis should concern itself with the sets of relationships within which such groups or institutions exist. An approach that resists summary comparisons, these inquiries demand an increase in "our

methodological caution," to explicitly question "the conditions and limits of comparability" (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1967, p. 21). Hasty comparisons between bureaucratic indicators, such as unemployment levels in different countries or between presumed cultural traits of national cultures, treat the elements of comparison independently of the relationships within which they acquire their meaning. Comparative research is fictitious and fallacious when it "neglects the real object of the comparison, namely the system of relations in which the facts under comparison are enmeshed" (Bourdieu and Darbel, 1991 [1966]).

In an illuminating 1967 article, Bourdieu and Passeron discuss these issues in more detail and deplore the fact that international conferences in the sociology of education rarely produce more than comparisons based on superficial, and even artificial indicators, rather than promote what is scientifically required: rigorous reflection on the indicators used, on the comparability of the institutions compared, and on the actual conditions of comparative research (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1967).

In the 1980s and 1990s, Bourdieu focused more systematically on processes of internationalization and globalization, and in so doing broadened his program of relational or "structural comparativism." The recently published volume *Impérialismes* (2023), which Julien Duval reviews in this issue, contains many of

Bourdieu's articles and notes from these years. Editors Franck Poupeau and Gisèle Sapiro recall that from approximately 1990 onward, in particular, Bourdieu initiated multiple international projects. These projects were concerned with the international circulation of ideas, the emergence and impact of transnational fields, the rethinking of the question of imperialism, and the launching of an international journal. *Liber* (1989-1999), the *European Review of Books*, as it was subtitled, appeared in up to ten languages, with the English edition lasting no more than a few issues.

The short text translated here was a part of these international projects. At the Parisian Center for European sociology, directed at the time by Monique de Saint Martin and Jean-Claude Combessie, an international network was formed in 1989 for "Comparative research on the educational institutions of corporate executives" [Étude comparée des institutions de formation des cadres dirigeants]. Two international workshops were held in Paris, in 1990 and 1992. Both were chaired by Bourdieu and resulted in a mimeographed report.¹

The following text is a translation of the concluding chapter of this report. It was never republished or translated, and because it appeared in a mimeographed report that did not circulate much beyond the participants of the workshop, it did not attract much attention.

Reflecting on the growing significance of transnational relations, Bourdieu first questions the limits of models based on a single national case. Maintaining that no method is more useful than international comparisons, he also returns to his earlier observation that they remain particularly difficult to put into practice. Elaborating on the conditions for genuine international scientific cooperation, he evokes factors that are never considered in today's routine calls for international collaboration and highlights both a shared scientific style and elective affinities among researchers as critical conditions for collaboration.

¹ The workshops were about "The Field of Higher Education and the Field of Power." The first took place at the *Maison des Sciences de l'Homme* (MSH) and the *Fondation Hugot* of the *Collège de France* (on November 8 and 9, 1990). The following meeting was held at the *Maison Suger* (on February 6 and 7, 1992). Contributions from both workshops were collected in de Saint Martin and Gheorghiu (eds) (1992). Two more international workshops followed. They included

participants from more than twenty countries, the network was coordinated by Monique de Saint Martin (Paris) and Donald Broady (Stockholm), and focused on elites, internationalization and comparative inquiry. The workshop reports, however, did not reach a broader audience than the first report. See Broady, De Saint Martin and Palme (eds.) (1995) ; Broady, Chmatko and De Saint Martin (eds.) (1997).

Some Remarks on the Conditions and Results of a Collective International Comparative Research Enterprise

Pierre Bourdieu

Like interdisciplinary research, international comparative research is universally celebrated, and rightly so. In fact, there is no method that is more useful, yet more difficult to *implement in practice* than the comparative method, and this for reasons that are essentially social. However, the obstacles that are most often invoked, such as *a parte subjecti*, the divergences between national intellectual traditions that have a tendency to delay the unification of the scientific field and render it challenging to construct shared research questions, and *a parte objecti*, or discordances between institutional traditions, which means that phenomenally different institutions can be very similar and phenomenally identical institutions quite different (I am thinking, for example, of the teacher training colleges called 'normal schools' in Budapest, Paris, and Pisa), are nothing when compared to the obstacles related to geographical and social distance and the logic at work in competition, which generates egotistical isolation, that oppose the *social organization of collective comparative work*.

Paradoxically, cultural producers – and sociologists themselves – almost always

forget to consider the social infrastructure of intellectual work. There are problems that cannot be solved and methods that cannot be implemented until a suitable organizational methodology has been found. The work presented here is the product of such a methodology, developed and implemented little by little, and through trial and error. To describe it would be to evoke, with many details that may appear to be anecdotal, the entire history of international scientific exchanges initiated by the *Centre de sociologie européenne* and the *Centre de sociologie de l'éducation et de la culture*: training seminars organized by the most advanced researchers in the various countries concerned, research training internships during which young researchers work alongside established researchers, present their work for discussion, and prepare publications and periodic seminars, with the intention to encourage detailed discussions on papers intended for publication, and the innumerable informal exchanges, skillfully orchestrated by Monique de Saint Martin's "invisible hand," that make all of the aforementioned exchanges possible. From all of this work, at once seemingly anarchic and profoundly methodical, emerged what seems to be the primary condition for genuine international scientific cooperation, a *common scientific style*, recognizable through a certain way of asking questions and of constructing subjects, and "elective affinities," which often become friendships. In fact,

the social obstacles are so great that only strong affective ties – particularly necessary to support frankness and critical freedom in scientific exchange, and also to establish a genuine, active interest in the work of others – can enable us to actually overcome them. In this way, all participants were able to agree to confront, when dealing with very different empirical *objects*, the same *constructed object*, rather than merely verbally agreeing on preliminarily constructed objects, which is often the basis interdisciplinary research that considers itself international.

As for the results, they are very closely linked to the comparative method's own effect. First, it seems to me that each of the national studies (as was evident in the discussions) was enriched by the contributions provided by the application of the same research question to different historical objects of study. The exploration of the social conditions of production of *modern state nobility* was greatly enhanced by comparing situations as different as Hungary during the interwar period and Algeria, considered as constituting two opposite poles of a continuum. On one hand, a quasi-feudal nobility based on genealogically-transmissible symbolic capital, and on the other, a recently-founded nobility dramatically facing the issue of legitimization and reproduction. Consequently, the role granted to the education system varies: while the ancient nobility of

hereditary transmission can go without formal education and the strictly technical dimension of formal training, content with education of a purely legitimizing nature (designed to reproduce symbolic capital and also ensure the acquisition of social capital), modern state nobility must give greater attention to specialized education and the technical dimension of training. This gives rise to specific contradictions, linked to the discrepancies between the logic of the school system, with its own requirements, and a purely genealogical logic (contradictions that did not spare Soviet-style regimes, with conflicts between the holders of hereditary political capital and the technocrats, in part descendants from the former, who intended to receive the material and symbolic benefits of degrees that recognize their technical competence). More profoundly, however, the comparison compels us to question the most fundamental evidence: the example of Algeria, and the crisis of the state institution that affects this country, brings to mind the evidence (as such forgotten) that there is no state nobility without the state, and that, consequently, state nobility increasingly depends on academic degrees, through which the state may both guarantee their validity and offer the main markets in which they are of use.

Nevertheless, new national nobilities are increasingly internationalized, both in

terms of how they operate and how they are formed and reproduced. We are witnessing a *unification of the global field of executive training*. The effects of this internationalization of training can only be grasped and understood, by definition, through comparative studies of the kind conducted here. In particular, it is only by understanding this international field as such that we can grasp the otherwise invisible effects that the existence of an international degree market has on national school markets. In many countries, and perhaps even in France today, conducting a study of the type we have carried out in France on the *grandes écoles* within the confines of the national school market is to resign oneself to disregarding the essential point. This is clearly evident in the case of an educational market such as Senegal, where the intervention of the World Bank has upset the balance of power between executives trained in the French style, in schools built according to the French *grandes écoles* model, and the new International – namely Americanized – executives, who through the training they have received, have acquired ways of thinking and lifestyles that include them in a certain economic and political order. The new International of national leaders finds one of its main foundations in common forms of thought, which are inculcated in training bodies of a new kind (to include business internships, study abroad trips, etc.). The actions of institutions such as the World

Bank could very well reflect the domination of a particular economic model, deeply rooted in the economic and political structures of an imperial nation that is imposed on a universal scale, that confers itself, through the intermediary of the school system, the appearance of universality. If in states that preceded the dominant mode of reproduction, we could observe an opposition, and sometimes a conflict, between the strictly symbolic functions of legitimization and the specifically technical function assigned to the training of leaders, it is clear today that the most technical forms of culture, and mathematics in particular (especially as they are utilized in economics), have become, through the seeming necessity and universality that they give to a vision of the world dominated by a certain vision of economics, one of the most powerful social foundations of the legitimacy of those who dominate the world.

The knowledge of these mechanisms of globalization involved in training and thought that we are working on collectively could be one of the key tools in critical internationalism, capable of effectively resisting, on symbolic ground, where economic and political powers are also at work, though in a dissimulated fashion, the new cultural International of the dominant powers.

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