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Trends Within Sociocultural Theory, and The Utility of “Cultural  
Capital” for SCT

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Abstract

This chapter seeks to extend the macro cultural psychological thrust of Vygotsky’s “classic” SCT, and to correct the popular recasting of Vygotsky as a “micro cultural psychologist.” A fruitful deepening of Vygotsky’s macro cultural approach is to construe psychological phenomena as “cultural capital” that have a capitalist form and content and a capitalist function of reproducing capitalist culture. This reveals the concrete cultural character of psychology, which is the goal of classic SCT and cultural psychology.

I demonstrate how cultural capital is a psychological tool in Vygotsky's sense. I explain the fruitful development of "cultural capital" in the work of Bourdieu. I also rebut criticisms of this concept as impersonal, mechanistic, static, and reified. On the contrary, I explain how cultural capital is both a scientific, cultural-psychological construct for explaining and describing psychological phenomena, and also an emancipatory construct that calls for the deepest social transformation, which is the means for the deepest psychological enrichment and fulfillment. Good science and good politics go hand in hand.

### Trends in SCT

In previous publications (Ratner, 2015, 2016) I have identified two conflicting trends within SCT. One is the classical approach of Vygotsky, Luria, Leontief, and their circle. The second trend is that of most of their followers, which I have called the revisionist approach.

Vygotsky's circle developed a general theory of psychology that was informed by Marxist concepts (see Ratner & Nunes 2017a; Ratner 2017a). I have called this approach "macro cultural psychology" (Ratner, 2018b). Vygotskian psychological principles were ultimately forms of

macro cultural factors. This made psychology an aid to understanding, evaluating, critiquing, and humanizing society and psychology. Less cultural conceptions of psychology minimize psychology's capacity to reflect, understand, evaluate, critique, and transform macro cultural factors.

An illustrative example of Vygotsky's macro cultural, political conception of psychology, and its implications for social improvement is his statement: "the basic law of historical human development, proclaims that human beings are created by the society [i.e., 'the development of technology, the degree of development of the production forces, and the structure of that social group (i.e., social class)'] in which they live and that it represents the determining factor in the formation of personalities" (Vygotsky, 1994, p. 176). Thus, "the source of the degradation of the personality in the capitalist form of manufacturing...cannot be resolved without the destruction of the capitalist system of organization of industry...by the socialist revolution...Alongside this process, a change in the human personality and an alteration of man himself must inevitably take place" (ibid., pp. 180-181).

The cultural constitution of psychology dialectically leads to cultural understanding, critique, and transformation.

Most (not all) of Vygotsky's followers, in most (not all) of their works have ignored this aspect of Vygotsky's work (Ratner & Nunes, 2017b). They have conceptualized human psychology in individualistic, subjectivistic, and interpersonal terms. This is sometimes difficult to identify because they allude to Vygotsky's classic, Marxist sociocultural theory, and they insinuate that they are following it. This misleads people in two directions 1) misconstruing revisionists as Marxist-oriented, and 2) misconstruing Vygotsky and Marx as allied with individualistic, subjectivist, interpersonal, social-psychological theory.

Cole & Engestrom (2007), for example, mention Vygotsky's emphasis on the cultural history of psychological phenomena. They cite Leontiev's statement that "the specific form in which individual activity exists is determined by the forms and means of material and mental social interaction that are created by the development of production..." (p. 486). Yet their cultural-historical activity theory and interventions never address the means or mode of production – or macro cultural factors in general (Ratner & Nunes, 2017b for examples).

Instead, they advocate "interventions in which more knowledgeable and less knowledgeable people and their cultural tools engage each other" (p. 488).

Interventions are touted as successful when they produce minor interpersonal changes. For instance, “‘Change Laboratories’...led to a qualitative shift in the way middle school teachers talked in their meetings about students...Positive talk about students as energetic and competent increased radically“ (p. 495). Thus, mere talk amongst teachers in a closed meeting is celebrated as successful pedagogical intervention by Cole & Engestrom (without any evidence from real classroom behavior).

Micro level constructs and interventions are incapable of explaining, describing, or eradicating important social-psychological issues that concerned Marx and Vygotsky. For instance, in 2015, only 4 percent of Detroit public school eighth graders were proficient in math and only 7 percent in reading. 67% of all American public-school eighth graders are not proficient in math or reading. The figure rises to over 80% for black students (<http://www.freep.com/story/news/local/michigan/2015/12/10/michigans-black-students-academic-performance/77099294/>). The share of American middle school students scoring at least proficient in American history is 18%, unchanged from 2010 (Wall St. Journal, April 29, 2015, p. A3). Interpersonal, personal, and subjective analyses and interventions are secondary (derivative) to this educational-psychological crisis. The problem and its solution obviously lie in macro cultural factors such as institutions, artifacts, cultural concepts

(collective representations), school budgets, textbooks, corrupt politics, racial segregation, testing and punishing students, and job opportunities.<sup>1</sup> “Schools filled with students of color receive less funding, but employ more inexperienced teachers. Accelerated programs and classes remain less accessible for black and Latino students – just 1/3 of public schools with high black and Latino enrollment offer calculus”

(<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/08/magazine/education-by-the-numbers.html>).

Yet Cole & Engestrom proffer homilies about the need for critical thinking, in indefinite, apolitical terms: “The Elkonin-Davydov curriculum...is designed to develop incessant questioning, a critical, reflective person who produces novelty through mastery” (p. 492). This is so frivolous and abstract that it would include financial ogres who used their mastery of capitalist economics to criticize financial regulations and create novel, financial instruments that caused the economic collapse of 2008.

SCT revisionists descend from the concrete to the abstract; they abandon the concrete, political, historical materialist, transformative, cultural psychology that Marx and Vygotsky called for, and they replace it with apolitical, personal/interpersonal abstractions that are open to

conservative directions (Ratner & Nunes, 2017b).<sup>2</sup> Thompson (2016) traces the same deterioration in politics and intellectual rigor with regard to the Frankfurt School.

## Advancing Classical, Vygotskyian SCT: The Possible Utility of Bourdieu's "Cultural Capital"

Recapturing and advancing Vygotsky's classic SCT requires that we conceptualize psychological phenomena as specimens of a concrete political-economic social system. Psychology exposes the social system (such as the Detroit educational and political-economic system) in terms of its psychological effects; and psychology produces insights into the need and direction for macro cultural transformation.

This reconceptualizing of psychology requires naming, defining, describing, explaining, predicting, and intervening in psychological issues in culturally concrete terms.

"Cultural capital" – developed by Bourdieu -- is a construct that has potential for fulfilling this mission Cultural capital conceptualizes psychological competencies as spawned by, organized by, supported by, operated by, expressing, and reproducing capitalist social relations. The

construct “Psychology is cultural capital” encapsulates capitalism (and all its features and dynamics) in the very name of psychological phenomena. Cultural capital symbolizes Althusser’s (2001, pp. 155-156) observation that “the school (but also other State institutions like the Church, or other apparatuses like the Army) teaches ‘know-how’, but in forms which ensure *subjection to the ruling ideology* or the mastery of its ‘practice’.” This form is cultural capital.

Cultural capital is particularly useful to cultural psychology-sociocultural theory because it is based upon a cultural-psychological construct that matches Vygotsky’s. This is known as “the habitus.”

### The habitus

In Bourdieu’s words, “habitus” is “that system of [subjective] dispositions which acts as a mediation between structures and practices ...Structures reproduce themselves by producing agents endowed with the system of predispositions which is capable of engendering practices adapted to the structures and thereby contributing to the reproduction of these structures” (Bourdieu, 1977 p. 487). “Inevitably inscribed within the dispositions of the habitus is the whole structure of the system of conditions as it presents itself in the experience of a life-condition

occupying a particular position within that structure” (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 172).<sup>3</sup>

Bourdieu emphasized that habitus actively generates meanings and practices, while being culturally formed through social experience, e.g., in different social positions. Habitus is culturally organized meaning-making.

Bourdieu’s habitus is remarkably close – in origin and in function – to Vygotsky’s use of language in psychology. Both are cultural phenomena that structure and mediate the mind. Vygotsky said, "Social interaction based on rational understanding, on the intentional transmission of experience and thought, requires some system of means. Human speech, a system that emerged with the need to interact socially in the labor process, has always been and will always be the prototype of this kind of means" (Vygotsky, 1987, p. 48). Bourdieu similarly said,

the capacity to see is a function of the knowledge, or concepts, that is the words, that are available to name visible things, and which are, as it were, programs for perception. A work of art has meaning and interest only for someone who possesses the cultural competence, that is, the code, into which it is encoded...A beholder who lacks the specific code...stops short at the sensible properties, or

at the emotional resonances aroused by these properties. He cannot move from the 'primary [sensory] stratum' to the 'stratum of secondary meanings,' i.e., the level of the meaning of what is signified, unless he possesses the concepts which go beyond the sensible properties...The [aesthetic] 'eye' is a product of history reproduced by education (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 2-3).

Wacquant (2016), explains the cultural basis and character of habitus: "Habitus is not a self-sufficient mechanism for the generation of action: the dissection of dispositions must always proceed in close connection with the mapping of the system of positions that alternately excite, suppress, or redirect the socially constituted capacities and inclinations of the agent" (p. 64).

### Cultural capital

Cultural capital extends the habitus to the capitalist political-economy. It does so by extending cultural factors into the political economy (as forms of capital), and then elucidating how these cultural factors transmit their capitalist character to the psychology that they

organize. Psychology is thus cultural capital along with cultural factors (see Ratner, 2018b).

Cultural capital is distinctive to capitalism. Cultural capital, like economic capital, is required by capitalism, invented by capitalists, supported by capitalism, administered by capitalism, laden with capitalist features, and is beneficial to capitalism. Cultural capital denotes that behavior/psychology is a form of capital, it has a capitalist form and content; psychology does not simply “interact with” capital. Capital is a significant element of our Weltanschauung, our ontology.

Cultural capital is concrete cultural psychology; it is not a construct for general cultural psychology, as habitus is. Nor is cultural capital a metaphor for “cultural resource,” “cultural schema,” or “embodied knowledge,” which are generic cultural terms. Cultural capital concretizes generic cultural and psychological features in a capitalist form, organization, administration, character, distribution, and function.

Bourdieu (1977, p. 186) made this point as follows: “cultural competence in its various forms cannot be constituted as cultural capital until it is inserted into the objective relations between the [specific] system of economic production and the system producing the producers.” “What is here of central interest for Bourdieu is not just the factual distribution

within society of resources of differing kinds but, further, the processes through which dominant classes effectively appropriate and monopolise these resources and use them to their own exclusive benefit – above all, in preserving their position of dominance in regard to subordinate classes” (Goldthorpe, 2007, p. 4).<sup>4</sup>

“Cultural capital” was used by Bourdieu in the early 1970s (Bourdieu, 1977, 1986; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). He was concerned to explain social class differences in educational achievement within capitalist society. His catholic mind developed a general cultural psychology that encompassed educational psychology as one exemplar. He argued that educational differences rested, in part, upon psychological differences (the “mentality” of different classes), which, in turn, were due to differential exposure to, and acquisition of, cultural resources. These resources include cultural artifacts (books, musical instruments, artworks), visits to museums and concerts, clothing, furniture, utensils, accouterments, travel, and technological artifacts such as computers and tablets (Sullivan, 2001).<sup>5</sup>

Bourdieu’s contribution to cultural psychology is to emphasize the concrete, capitalist nature of cultural resources that imbue psychology with capitalist forms and content (see Ratner, 2018a).

Capitalism maintains and expands itself through organizing capitalist forms of culture and psychology.

Cultural capital fits into Vygotsky's SCT. At the end of chapter 4, Thinking and Speech, Vygotsky (1987, p. 187) said, "this recognition of the historical nature of verbal thinking requires that in analyzing it we apply the same methodological theses that historical materialism applies to the other historical phenomena of human society." Cultural capital realizes this objective. It extends the capitalist, historical materialist analysis of cultural phenomena (religion, education, family) to psychology and verbal thinking.

Cultural capital is what is meant by phrases "bourgeois art," "bourgeois philosophy," "bourgeois economics," "bourgeois individual," "bourgeois family," "bourgeois house," "bourgeois romantic love." It is what Vygotsky meant by "bourgeois psychology." "Bourgeois" is the essence of "cultural capital."

Cultural capital is not literally monetary capital. It does not generate monetary surplus value that can be deposited in a bank. One difference is that cultural capital is transmitted slowly through socialization of habitus, whereas economic capital is transmitted quickly, via writing a check. This sedimentation of capital in the interstices of mental habits makes cultural capital more stable and enduring and difficult to alter than economic

capital that can dissipate quickly. Cultural capital, instantiated in agency, is thus a conservative force against social change.

Bourdieu explained the relation of cultural capital to economic capital: “Economic capital is “a *lex insita*,” the principle underlying the immanent regularities of the social world.” Economic capital is what unifies diverse cultural forms in a coherent system that is not obvious from diverse appearances. “Economic capital is at the root of all the other types of capital.” They are transformed, disguised forms of economic capital (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 249).

Economic capital requires a vast supportive cultural system of beliefs, motivation, perceptions, emotions, literacy, numeracy, family structure, tastes, desires, self-concept, recreation, entertainment, news, and artifacts such as houses, furniture, clothing, artistic decoration, literature, philosophy, health care, religion, and music. This is what cultural capital is. Capitalists have systematically remade socio-cultural phenomena into forms of cultural capital to bolster economic capital. This is the point of neoliberalism.

Cultural capital denotes that capital is broader, more sophisticated, and nuanced than pure money. Capital takes on numerous cultural forms that extend it to all social domains. These non-economic forms make capital more dominant than it would be as mere commerce. (Just as conservative corporate

politicians recruited evangelical Christians to conservative political organizations, thereby extending and strengthening conservative, corporate, politics in religious form.)

Cultural capital is an excellent dialectical concept that reveals capital to be more than its single economic form. It is replete with determinations of diverse, emergent forms. These include psychological activity (dispositions, “mentalite“).

Encapsulating psychology within cultural capital, integrated with political economy and culture, enriches all of these elements with the others. Psychology is enriched by culture and political economy, while culture and political economy are expanded to have psychological dimensions and determinations. This makes cultural capital vital to SCT and cultural psychology, as well as to culture theory and Marxism.

Cultural capital may be the germ cell -- or the essential, totalizing, unit of analysis -- of psychology and culture in capitalist political economy (see Blunden, 2017 for the concept of germ cell in Vygotsky’s and Marx’s work). Cultural capital is also the quintessential indigenous psychological construct for people in capitalist societies. It is the local, cultural form that psychology has. Moreover, because capital and capitalism are virtually universal in today’s world, cultural capital may very well be a

universal psychology. It may be a concrete universal; a universal phenomenon with a concrete (capitalistic) form. In the past, universals concerning culture and psychology were abstractions (humans cooperate, humans have language, language mediates consciousness) because concrete features of culture and psychology were local (e.g., aristocratic love, Greek gods). Now, concrete features of capitalism are universal, so that universals are concrete. Cultural capital may supersede the distinction between universal and local, abstract and concrete, and etic and emic.

Two examples of cultural capital illustrate its features and functions.

### Examples of Cultural Capital in Psychology

#### Bernstein's linguistic codes

Basil Bernstein was an avid follower of Vygotsky and Luria from the 1950s. He argued that language is a crucial element of culture that reflects social position and varies with it, and reproduces the social division of labor and class structure of society. Upper class and lower class individuals engage in very different social activities and life styles,

which structure their linguistic styles, or “codes.” These codes, in turn, structure thinking, perceiving, emotions, and behavior in ways that reproduce the original kinds of activities and social structures. Language is thus a form of social control. Bernstein emphasizes that by channeling behavior in certain forms, language preserves the class hierarchy: “The relative backwardness of many working-class children...may well be a culturally induced backwardness transmitted by the linguistic process. Such children’s low performance on verbal I.Q. tests, their difficulty with ‘abstract’ concepts, their failures within the language area, their general inability to profit from the school, all may result from the limitations of a restricted code” (Bernstein 1977: 175, my emphasis).

Language codes in capitalism are capitalist linguistic codes, or “linguistic capital,” that follow capital’s requirements. They are neither personal nor purely cultural (in an apolitical sense). Importantly, the fact that psychology/behavior has a macro cultural, capitalist, form does not mean that it is created and maintained by political, economic, and institutional leaders of capitalism. No such leader invents lower class, restricted linguistic codes and imposes them upon lower class individuals. These codes are invented and maintained by lower class individuals as a way of crystalizing, or totalizing, their social conditions. They utilize their

creative agency to internalize their oppression and suffer its affects in the distinctive form of linguistic capital. The fact that they create this activity does not mean it is an authentic, fulfilling expression of their true interests, and should be respected as such. On the contrary, respecting and encouraging linguistic capital, respects and encourages the class system that constrains people to generate them.

### Maternal love

Sociologist Daniel Cook (2004) explains how new emotions in parents were cultivated in the 1920s and 30s by clothing manufacturers and marketers in order to induce them to consume large quantities of costly clothing. Clothing merchants cultivated a distinctive, new form of mother love that was manifested in continuously seeking out every imagined desire the child had, and indulging them through consumer products (see Ratner, 2007, pp. 98-100 for summary). Maternal love was made into an insatiable need that was commodified and expressed through products, so as to generate sales and profits. Maternal love became a profit-generating device that was generated by capitalists in a certain form in order to advance capitalist financial interests. Maternal love did not become cultural capital or emotional capital (see Ratner,

2007, pp. 96-98 for a cultural-capital analysis of romantic love) in order to increase the financial wealth of mothers and children.

Childhood stages of development also became cultural capital: Each stage required new products for self-definition and achievement. Each stage should be reached and surpassed as quickly as possible, with new products necessary to define each stage. This converted psychological development into a capitalist phenomenon, or cultural capital/developmental capital. It was generated by economic capital, took on characteristics analogous to capital, and resulted in behavior that fulfilled capital's financial objectives.

### Cultural Capital Deepens SCT and Cultural Psychology

Cultural capital is deep cultural psychology because it expands our conception of culture to include the concrete political economy, and it brings all of this concrete culture within lived psychology. (It also brings concrete culture within the academic study of psychology, which I write as Psychology.) This was central to Marx's culture theory and his conception of human activity and consciousness. As Rubin explained, "The concept of labour must be defined in such a way that it comprises all the characteristics of the social organisation of

labour, characteristics which give rise to the form of value, which is appropriate to the products of labour. A concept of labour from which the concept of value does not follow, and particularly a concept of labour in the physiological sense, i.e. the concept of labour which lacks all the features which are characteristic of its social organisation in commodity production, cannot lead to the conclusion which we seek from the Marxian standpoint of the dialectical method” (Rubin, 1978). Rubin articulates how labor is part of the capital system and as such required reformatting as a commodity with exchange value that can produce capitalist surplus value, or profit. General labor does not produce profit; only capitalist labor does.

Cultural capital fulfills Rubin’s point by highlighting the characteristics of social-psychological phenomena that are formatted in terms of the capitalist political economy. This is linguistically/conceptually objectified by construing language as linguistic capital, emotions as emotional capital, academic knowledge as scholastic capital, the body as body capital, sex is erotic capital, education as educational capital, cognition as intellectual capital, athletics as athletic capital (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990, pp. 93, 72; Bourdieu, 1984). Even attention is commodified as “hits per second” on internet ads, for which advertisers pay money. This leads to designing web materials into discrete units of attention that can

be captured by advertisers in commodity form of exchange value. This makes attention into a form of cultural capital.<sup>6</sup>

Again, the suffix, “capital” does not imply that these phenomena are profit-making instruments, in the economic sense. Rather, the suffix “capital” denotes their basis in capital; their infusion with capitalist features such as exchange value, commodification, alienation, individualism, instrumentalism; their social distribution in accordance with capital; their congruence with the capitalist political economy; their frequent ownership by capitalists; and their promulgation of the political economy and class structure. Thus, Bourdieu’s body capital is related to social class, and the body operates as a bearer of class-based taste differences (Sarpila, 2014; see also Taylor, 2013 for an outstanding analysis of sexual capital).<sup>7</sup> Cottingham (2016, p. 452) explains how “emotional capital is inextricably linked to variations in power and privilege in contemporary society.” Skeggs & Yuill (2015, p. 3) convey the sense of cultural capital in their article “showing how the relationship between property and personhood is being currently reconfigured as Facebook experiments with ways to accrue maximum profit.” “Facebook is better understood as a powerful advertising oligopoly that lubricates the circulation of capital rather than just as a social network.”

“Cultural capital” is valuable because it brings changes in capital that occur in the political economy, into culture and psychology (see Courtney, 2016 for example). Cultural capital is thus a valuable predictor of psychology. As the capitalist economy requires fewer creative, knowledgeable employees, and as the political system fears these attributes as inspiring social unrest in the failing economy, political and economic leaders extend lower class cultural capital to the middle class, in order to adjust middle class subjectivity to a subordinate role. This is achieved by federal educational laws such as No Child Left Behind which standardize and restrict school curricula to generate lower class forms of consciousness among middle class as well as working class children. Middle class capital is further restricted to smaller and wealthier sections of the population by raising the cost of college to make it increasingly unavailable to members of the lower middle class.

Cultural capital is a deduced hypothesis about psychology in capitalism.

We must empirically ascertain whether intelligence, education, esthetics, and foreign language actually have a basis in capital, the characteristics of capital, and whether they reproduce capitalism

psychologically, thorough individual behavior that follows the trajectory of capital. For example, is learning a foreign language a class-differentiated activity regarding its differential appeal, its mastery, and its consequences for future class position? Does L2 have a commodity form and is it used instrumentally for egocentric, competitive advantage over others, rather than for intrinsic interest?

Cultural capital is not a singular, homogeneous, general resource, or variable, that has one (middle class) form and one (positive) effect.

Economic capital requires and generates cultural-psychological capital that perpetuates the different social relations of different classes. Cultural capital must be qualitatively unequal in different classes, in accordance with their different social relations, competencies, and status. This is not a matter of quantitative difference in a fixed attribute such as intelligence or motivation (Savage & Bennett, 2005). This is manifested in Bernstein's linguistic codes. Lower class codes impoverish people socially and intellectually in accordance with economic imperatives of lower class positions. Middle class linguistic codes adjust middle class individuals to succeeding in their roles. They are political in this sense of supporting the social order.

As Bourdieu (1990, p. 64) said, “all competence (linguistic, political, etc.), far from being a simple technical capacity acquired in certain conditions, is a power tacitly conferred on those who have power over the economy or (as the very ambiguity of the word ‘competence’ indicates) an attribute of status.”

Cultural capital is thus a form of “governmentality” in Foucault’s words. It is a way of structuring, or disciplining behavior, and exercising social control over people to align their competencies with the social structure.

Cultural capital is not a homogeneous, beneficent, quantitative variable like money, where the more you have, the better off you are – e.g., the more education you get, the better off you are; the more you watch the news, the better informed you are. We must speak of qualitatively different upper class cultural capital and lower class cultural capital; masculine cultural capital and feminine cultural capital, which prepare men and women for different social roles (Cottingham, 2016, p. 452; Flemmen and Jarness, 2017).<sup>8</sup> Cultural capital is not designed to uplift everyone. Following economic capital, cultural capital is designed to uplift an elite few via middle and upper class cultural capital (and economic capital) at the expense of impoverishing the majority of people via lower class cultural capital (and little economic capital).

Social-psychological debilities are not the result of possessing too little cultural capital. That is called “the cultural deficiency hypothesis.” It presumes

that cultural capital, and society itself, are beneficent, enriching, and empowering. Debilities are presumed to result from under-socialization -- which allow individual or biological, non-social tendencies free reign. This is remedied by greater exposure to society and cultural capital that control and reorganize non-social impulses. This theory legitimates the status quo by overlooking and obscuring the politics of culture and psychology.

Bourdieu's cultural capital emphasizes the politics of culture and cultural capital as alienated and oppressive. This is what causes psychological (and physical) debilities. Debilities are the result of possessing certain kinds of cultural capital that are necessary and normative (Ratner, 2017b).

Cultural capital is primarily a matter of its "use value" – i.e., its culturally formed, class-differentiated, class-functional, content – not its "exchange value" – or its abstract, quantitative amount.

Failure is not an atypical mistake. It is a deliberate, desirable, normal element of capitalism. Failure is functional to capitalism. Lower class failure – economic, social, psychological -- is the means of upper class wealth and power.<sup>9</sup> Failure is due to the presence of debilitating culture, not the absence of fulfilling culture. It is an act of commission, not omission.<sup>10</sup>

The qualitative conceptualization of cultural capital reframes our understanding of social-psychological failure and exclusion. Failure is caused by the possession of failure-inducing cultural capital that recapitulates the economic failure of the bulk of the populace.

Individuals must be taught to fail, and they must be provided with appropriate tools that generate failure. Failure requires particular dispositions for "getting it wrong," for incompetence and apathy. Failure (incompetence) is a skill, a competence. "Learned helplessness" denotes this skill. All of this is encapsulated in cultural capital for the subaltern classes.<sup>11</sup> It is systematically disseminated through cultural resources including education, news, entertainment, advertising, popular arts and recreation, work, religion, and politics. "The politics of ignorance," "the politics of failure," "the politics of apathy," maintain the lower classes in their place so that they do not expect or demand success in the system that is incapable and undesirous of affording it.

Overcoming failure is not simply filling a void with appropriate competencies. It must expunge debilitating competencies that have become sedimented in the psyche. They act like antigens that protect unhealthy organs by blocking the introjection of transplanted, healthy organs. Unhealthy antigens in psychology are cultural capital. They must be extirpated for healthy psychological functioning to occur.

## Critiques of Cultural Capital

Goldthorpe (2007) objects to Bourdieu's social reproduction thesis in which education reproduces the political economy through cultural capital. He argues that education empowers people to become upwardly mobile and accumulate middle class cultural capital. This means that education is not cultural capital which follows the path of economic capital: "Researchers who are concerned with cultural influences on children's educational attainment... should not accept the concept of cultural capital. They should abandon it in favour of a theoretically more neutral and more limited one, such as that of cultural resources."

"Bourdieu's view of the transmission of cultural capital as a key process in social reproduction is simply wrong...because differing class conditions do not give rise to such distinctive and abiding forms of *habitus* as Bourdieu would suppose" (ibid., pp. 19, 14). Goldthorpe rejects the entire idea that psychology is a function of class or social conditions, and that psychology reproduces them on the individual level. He also rejects the idea of class structure in which dominant classes achieve and sustain an effective intergenerational monopolisation of cultural capital (ibid., p. 16).

Goldthorpe argues that cultural-psychological phenomena are generic, abstract “resources” that can be used any way the subject wishes. Education can be used to empower students on the individual and interpersonal levels. Goldthorpe cites “a growing influx of working-class children into higher levels of education and long periods of rising rates of upward educational and class mobility” (p. 17) as demonstrating that educational advances are independent of political economy, and indeed improve political-economic inequality.

This viewpoint is invalid. Education in capitalist societies is structured by class and the political economy. Educational and class mobility only increase when the political economy expands and needs more middle class competencies (Beadie, 2010). When the political economy stagnates, education does not propel lower class people into the middle class. Class and racial disparities increase over time, which is termed cumulative deficit.

Hinton’s critique of cultural capital (2015) shares Goldthorpe’s mistakes. Hinton similarly complains that social reproduction and cultural capital make capitalism hegemonic and impossible to change: “Frameworks of metaphorical capital use neoliberal vocabulary, arguably endorsing capitalism’s hegemony” (ibid., p. 299). Hinton seeks to restore

respect for humanity with personal notions of behavior. Both of Hinton's ideas are erroneous. Describing capitalism does not endorse it. Marx's deep descriptions were highly critical. Moreover, nominally changing the narrative about capitalism to more humanistic terms does not humanize its real social and material characteristics. Hinton's critique of cultural capital follows Goldthorpe's in overlooking essential features of capitalist society and impeding their replacement.

### The Benefits of "Cultural Capital"

An important benefit that the concept of cultural capital provides is correcting the prevalent use of abstractions which ignore concrete, cultural-historical aspects of psychological phenomena. We have identified this in Cole & Engestrom's concept of psychological development. They argue for enhancing development through "zones of proximal development" (see Lantolf & Thorne, 2006, pp. 263-290, for an excellent summary of ZPD). The authors construe ZPD as a general zone of interpersonal support for psychological development. Mere engagement with knowledgeable people is taken to stimulate development beyond what the individual could achieve. However, we have seen that this level

of abstraction fails to address material and social macro cultural factors, and their behavioral/psychological results. ZPD personalizes development that is really a function of broad cultural factors. This is obvious in the case of educational psychology in Detroit.

“Cultural capital” corrects this error of cultural-psychological abstraction. It reveals that ZPD is a zone for transmitting concrete cultural capital. Vygotsky (1997) acknowledged this: “every epoch has its own form of education” because educational activity has always corresponded to “those particular economic and social structures of society that defined the whole history of the epoch” (pp. 55, 56; See Beadie, 2010 for education and capitalism). This brings all the debilitations of cultural capital into ZPDs. This is obvious in Detroit’s public education, which are “zones of impaired development” (ZID).

The development that occurs in ZPDs is thus culturally concrete and variable, fraught with macro cultural factors. It is not an abstract zone of idealized personal interaction outside concrete society that is uniformly and universally enriching. Raymond Williams (1977, p. 136-7) eloquently stated that “socialization is abstract and mystifying since it is precisely the historical and class variations of socialization that need to be studied.”

Identifying the alienating, oppressive features of cultural capital logically calls for eradicating cultural capital. Cultural capital is an inherently critical (self-critical) social-psychological construct that calls for its own Aufhebung (supersession).

And because cultural capital crystallizes capitalism, superseding cultural capital requires superseding capitalism. Cultural capital is a revolutionary construct in this sense. It exemplifies the dialectic of oppression-emancipation, actual-possible, real-ideal. The more profoundly and comprehensively oppression is comprehended, the more profoundly and comprehensively it can be negated.

Conversely, identifying manifestations of oppression without their roots in the political economy, leaves us incapable of eradicating these manifestations at their roots. Calls for eliminating social problems such as injustice, poverty, pollution, brutality, discrimination, and corruption remain abstract until they are linked with concrete political calls for transforming their common, political-economic basis.

For instance, students protest high college tuition that impacts them, immigrants protest deportation that impacts them, Muslims protest discrimination against them, black people protest police brutality against them, gun owners protest rules on gun purchases, transgenders protest

rules that govern which bathrooms they may use, union members protest against reductions in their pensions. All these protests are self-serving and fragmentary because they are confined to improving the lot of particular groups within the existing system.

The aforementioned movements seek inclusion in capitalism; a chance to compete for its riches without interference, to gain more for themselves – i.e., lower prices (tuition) and more income (pensions).

“Immigrant rights,” for example, simply allow people to leave an impoverished, dangerous country for a stable, richer one where they can live more comfortably. It does not solve social problems in either country. Nor do transgender “bathroom rights” alter the disregard for employees who work in precarious, dangerous authoritarian conditions. Issues such as bathroom rights distract attention away from capitalist work, under the appearance of humanitarian concern for people. This is why the most conservative business organizations support civil rights for circumscribed groups, while they never support workers’ rights for the working class as a whole.

Multicultural movements ignore the material conditions of capitalism. Minorities do not seek to restrict or remove the capitalist structure, thereby expanding socioeconomic benefits to the populace.

Minorities do not protest “corporate personhood,” or the financial corruption of the American political system, or the class structure, or the profit motive, or alienation, or commodification. In this sense, they are conservative supporters of the status quo. Minorities appeal to the governments of capital to enforce civil rights and human rights. They do not overthrow these agencies and conditions of capital – which is why civil rights are never fully achieved, despite their widespread popularity.

The immigrant rights movement does not attack the capitalist form and politics and function of immigration, i.e., working conditions for immigrants; nor does it analyze the politics of anti-immigration movements; nor does it devise an alternative immigration politics, form, and function that considers concrete, societal needs, resources, conditions, morals, norms, and values. Immigrant rights supersede all of this by abstractions: “respecting the humanity of immigrants” and the “inherent right of free immigration,” and “fighting for justice,” and condemning people who oppose free immigration as disrespectful and intolerant. Cast in these abstract, personalistic, terms, immigrant rights (and civil rights and human rights in general) pose no threat to the status quo, and no possibility of emancipation from it (see Thompson, 2016 for the domestication of critical theory in these times).

In order for these social movements to truly benefit their members – as opposed to giving them a (declining) chance at a slice of the capitalist pie -- they must link particular injustices to broad, core exploitation and transform it. This is what cultural capital does. It identifies the capitalist core of culture and behavior, and it seeks to restructure that core by unifying fragmentary struggles so they focus upon their common, deep cause (enemy).

Cultural capital concretizes and realizes Vygotsky's insight that "Life becomes creation only when it is finally freed of all the social forms that distort and disfigure it. Questions of education will have been resolved when questions of life will have been resolved" (Vygotsky, 1997, p. 350).

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Lantolf & Poehner (2014, pp. 57-61) correct micro cultural emphases by explaining how they must be encompassed by macro cultural analyses and changes. Vygotsky similarly observed, “Not in the narrow confines of his own personal life and his own personal affairs will one become a true creator in the future” (Vygotsky, 1997, p. 350).

<sup>2</sup> Another conservative direction of micro cultural psychology is the populist, indigenous, multicultural reliance on local community values for psychological development and for evaluating psychological interventions.

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Cole & Engestrom urge: “to produce appropriate and sufficient internal motivation, school assignments should draw upon the context and structure of the kinds of activities that children can expect to engage in later” (2007, p. 491). If these social activities include violence, prejudice, apathy, religious extremism, and corruption, Cole & Engestrom would make them central topics to be reproduced in pedagogy. Cole & Engestrom even make congruence with community values the ethical criterion of CHAT interventions. Interventions should “Do no harm” to communities (ibid., p. 488). This is conservative legitimation of the status quo that includes mysticism, patriarchy, alienation, commodification, and occasionally slavery (Ratner, 2018b).

This conservative endorsement of indigenous values contradicts Cole & Engestrom’s previously stated goal of novel, critical thinking. It also opposes radical changes in society that Vygotsky called for in transforming exploitive capitalism into socialism. Socialism does violent harm to capitalism and its ruling class. Intervening in communities to promote radical social change is unethical according to Cole & Engestrom.

<sup>3</sup> “The roots of habitus are found in Aristotle’s notion of hexis, elaborated in his doctrine of virtue in the Nicomachean Ethics (c.

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350 BC), meaning an acquired yet entrenched state of moral character that orients our feelings and desires, and thence our conduct. The term was translated into Latin as *habitus* (past participle of the verb *habere*, to have or hold) in the thirteenth century by Thomas Aquinas in his Summa *Theologiae*, written in 1269.” “Bourdieu elaborated *habitus* analytically at the turn of the 1970s through a dual critique of Sartre’s phenomenology and Lévi-Strauss’s structuralism” (Wacquant, 2016, pp. 65, 66).

<sup>4</sup> The fact that a competence earns money does not make it cultural capital. A labor union that writes popular critiques of capitalism and sells them for \$1 so that poor people can purchase them is not producing cultural capital in the sense that Bourdieu and Goldthorpe define it.

<sup>5</sup> Sociologist Domhoff (2002) has documented the social distribution of diverse capital in the American ruling class. He details the elite private schools, universities, and social clubs, as well as secretive political organizations that the ruling class attends, which provide them with the cultural and psychological resources for sustaining their political-economic position. Rivera (2015) compliments this analysis.

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<sup>6</sup> The original conception of human activity as cultural capital was articulated by Marx in his Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts, chapter on money. He explains how money transforms individual attributes into psychological capital. With money, “what I *am* and *am capable of* is by no means determined by my individuality. I *am* ugly, but I can buy for myself the *most beautiful* of women. Therefore, I am not *ugly*, for the effect of *ugliness* – its deterrent power – is nullified by money. I am bad, dishonest, unscrupulous, stupid; but money is honoured, and hence its possessor.”

Marx explains the alternative to commodifying human activity. It is personal development of those activities so that they express your actual, humanity instead of your financial capacity to buy them: “Assume *man* to be *man* and his relationship to the world to be a human one: then, every one of your relations to man and to nature must be a *specific expression*, corresponding to the object of your will, of your *real individual* life. If you want to enjoy art, you must be an artistically cultivated person; if you want to exercise influence over other people, you must be a person with a stimulating and encouraging effect on other people.”

<sup>7</sup> This is the difference between cultural capital and “Human capital.”

Human capital was developed by Gary Becker in 1964. He was a member of the neoliberal, Chicago School of Economics. “Human capital” is defined

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as a culturally provided competence, such as educational knowledge, technical skills, administrative traits, that individuals utilize as instruments for their own social and economic advancement. It is like money – a universal good that makes everyone more comfortable and secure.

Cultural capital rejects this misleading, ideological, apolitical conception.

<sup>8</sup> Similarly, emotional capital is not a natural, universal variable with a single form. This is what is implied when men are accused of lacking emotional capital (and emotionality). Emotionality is presumed to have a natural, feminine form which men lack. In fact, emotional capital has gendered forms. Men possess as much (quantitative) emotional capital as women; however, theirs is a different quality that structures their emotions qualitatively differently from women's (Cottingham, 2016).

<sup>9</sup> When businesspeople and politicians apologize for their egregious acts, this is disingenuous, mystifying, and legitimizing of normal pathology. It frames the acts as a personal failing of the actor as ignorant, mistaken, careless, hot-tempered, or greedy. And it punishes the miscreant individual, rather than transforming the pathological system.

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<sup>10</sup> Oppressive systems also require that social science fails to comprehend their full oppression and its social basis. Succeeding in understanding culture would expose its oppressive character and call for its transformation. Failing to comprehend the social character of society and its diverse phenomena (including psychology) is treated as success, and is rewarded by the powers that be in the form of financial and social benefits; while succeeding in comprehending society (as Marxists do) is typically (with few exceptions) treated as error/bias and punished by ostracism and criticism. (This is true in China that has minimized Marxist social science and economics, while promoting bourgeois, positivist social science and economics.) Social science thus takes the form of cultural capital that serves the social system.

<sup>11</sup> Bourdieu explains that lower class individuals have difficulty availing themselves of middle, or upper, class cultural capital because their social environment has no use for them and impedes their reception. This is borne out by the history of literacy: “Where people needed little literacy to manage their affairs...it was difficult to persuade them to embrace a skill which was, for all practical purposes superfluous” (Cressy, in Ratner, 2002, pp. 24-25 and chapter one).