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Bourdieu's Field and the Sociology of Welfare

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ABSTRACT

Bourdieu conceptualises most aspects of social life in terms of *fields*, which constitute sites of struggle over a central *stake.* The resources which are used in these struggles, and whose appropriation is at stake, are defined as types of *capital*: economic, cultural, social and symbolic. Each field involves a set of players, of agents who are engaged in practices and strategies on the basis of an *habitus*. It is contended in this article that such an approach can be usefully mobilised to develop a sociological analysis of welfare. The model has to be slightly altered to make it more adequate for the study of the welfare field. First, what Bourdieu calls political capital is given a more prominent place. Secondly, the focus is more definitely set on the rates at which types of capital are converted in the welfare field. It is argued that such a model satisfies the central requirements of a sociology of welfare, in that it places welfare activities within the wider social context while grasping their internal dynamic. It provides an effective framework for addressing the main questions which are raised by a sociology of welfare.

INTRODUCTION

Although they often rely on concepts, frameworks and methods which have been elaborated by sociologists, welfare studies rarely seek to answer sociological questions. Sociology has become in this context a resource which is mobilised to deal with non-sociological and, more often than not, practical questions about social policy and welfare. Yet, social theory has not remained silent on the emergence and development of the welfare state. Contemporary social theory is addressing this theme of welfare institutions and practices. Jürgen Habermas's analysis of the 'colonisation of the lifeworld', which he has formulated in *The Theory of Communicative Action* (1984 and 1987), is of great relevance for the study of the welfare state. In fact, the only concrete example he uses in

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the book concerns welfare. Michel Foucault's ideas about bio-power point directly to practices associated with welfare institutions (Hewitt, 1983). Feminist theorists link welfare institutions with the reproduction of gender inequalities (Gordon, 1990; Pascall, 1986; Sainsbury, 1994). None of these analyses can operate as a unified and coherent framework for the sociological study of welfare. But they contribute to it and provide important elements. The aim of this article is to construct a framework which facilitates a sociological analysis of welfare institutions.

BOURDIEU'S SOCIOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

In this attempt at elaborating a unified sociological framework for the analysis of welfare, I turn, perhaps unexpectedly, to Pierre Bourdieu. He is well known for his work on the sociology of education and also for his analysis of what he calls the cultural field. But he has also sustained an interest in epistemological matters and has sought to define in an explicit way what is involved in sociological analysis. He has outlined the procedure through which a phenomenon is made into an object of sociological investigation: 'a great deal of his work can be said to be an attempt to identify the structure and uses of field as a method which constructs the object of research' (Harker *et al.*, 1990, p. 8). He has never shown any great interest in welfare studies, but his general approach can be mobilised to develop a sociological analysis of welfare. I adopt here a pragmatic approach to Bourdieu's work, the very approach he himself adopted in relation to thinkers who influenced him. He is not concerned with the orthodoxy of the ideas he borrows and, in any case, rejects any attempt at reading his work as a 'theoretical treatise'. His frame of analysis is meant as a useful tool to account for empirical findings. I turn to Bourdieu's work in a similar spirit; it is treated as a tool which allows us to think about the way 'welfare' operates, and not in terms of orthodoxy. Ultimately, the usefulness of this framework will be decided by the empirical work it performs: by the way it makes sense of practices and institutions observed in concrete welfare situations.

One should note from the start a close correspondence between the main thrust of Bourdieu's sociology and the central tenets of the contemporary discourse on welfare. They all focus on the idea of power and control. Habermas, Foucault and most feminist writers, in their own ways, analyse welfare in terms of control. Welfare institutions and practices are always presented as processes of control, as participating in some way in the exercise of power. Welfare is analysed in the context of *bio-power* and *normalisation* by Foucault. It belongs, for Habermas, to an exchange through which marginalised categories are pacified: a way of controlling

the lower classes. Feminist analyses focus on the many ways through which social policy sustains the dependency of women: 'A unifying theme of these feminist critiques of social policy has been an analysis of the welfare state in relation to the family: as supporting relations of dependency within families: as putting women into caring roles; and as controlling the work of reproduction' (Pascall, 1986, p. 3). Bourdieu's analysis of fields of activity is about access to, control over and struggles for capital, as fields are structured in terms of domination. The model which is presented in this article results from the encounter between Bourdieu's mode of analysis and the contemporary discourse of social theory on welfare.

Field and capital

Bourdieu places most aspects of social life in the context of objective structures which constitutes what he calls *fields*. A field refers to a configuration of relations between positions. Society as a whole forms a field, which is structured according to relations of domination. But society also contains a range of fields; it should be seen as the paramount field, from which other fields are never fully separated. The first task in the analysis of any field is to understand its location within the social formation. Fields will vary according to how much autonomy they acquire from the entirety of the social field. An autonomous field is characterised by a high level of specificity: it possesses its own history; a particular configuration of agents operate within it and struggle for a distinctive stake; it induces its own habitus and upholds a distinctive set of beliefs. Such an autonomous field is highly differentiated and marked by sharp boundaries, beyond which the field ceases to have any impact on practice.

The question arises then of the location of the welfare field in the social formation and of the degree of its differentiation. The welfare state is sometimes defined, in a very literal way, in terms of the relationship between administrative agencies and clients (Offe, 1984). The state is always involved in one way or the other in the provision of social benefits and services, but the degree of this involvement fluctuates greatly. The welfare system engages not only the state, but also market mechanisms and many agencies within the civil society: it represents a 'mix'. Welfare systems do not only differ according to how 'developed' they are, but according to the way their diverse elements are connected. Consequently, the welfare state does not entirely hinge on the relation between state administration and clients. Although a crucial agent, state administration has no monopoly in providing social services. Once this point is accepted, the welfare field must be seen as extending beyond the bureaucratic field, with which it none the less overlaps.

Only those who can mobilise the relevant resources are able to take part in the struggles which define a field. These resources are conceptualised by Bourdieu as capital, which is of course unequally distributed. The position of an agent in the field is characterised by the volume and the type of capital it has access to. Bourdieu considers four types of capital:

(i) economic capital, which corresponds to material wealth;
(ii) cultural capital, which covers educational credentials and cultural goods;
(iii) social capital, which refers to the mobilisation of people through connections, social networks and group membership;
(iv) finally, the symbolic capital is the form taken by all types of capital when their possession is perceived as legitimate.

Although all these types of capital form resources in all fields, their hierarchy varies from one field to another. The accumulation of one kind of capital represents for Bourdieu the stake of the struggles in one particular field.

The whole conceptual apparatus elaborated by Bourdieu turns around considerations of power. Fields are presented as structures of domination, within which diverse forces operate and struggle. Capital is power, or rather it is a resource which yields power. Symbolic capital itself comes very close to the notion of legitimacy. But this omnipresence of power in Bourdieu's work has its drawbacks: for it appears in very different shapes and forms and, although used extensively, it is not deeply probed into. This occurs mainly because power is presented as a generalised resource, 'as nature force ... which flows through the system from top to bottom' (Jenkins, 1992, p. 123).

Two fields are more explicitly linked with power. The basic structure and hierarchy of all other fields derives from the overarching *field of power.* Bourdieu sees this central structure of domination in terms of the opposition between those rich in cultural capital but poor in economic capital, and those rich in economic capital but poor in cultural capital.

> The field of power is the space of relations of force between agents or between institutions having in common the possession of the capital necessary to occupy the dominant positions in different fields (notably economic or cultural). It is the site of struggles between holders of different powers (or kinds of capital) which, like the symbolic struggles between artists and the 'bourgeois' in the nineteenth century, have at stake the transformation or conservation of the relative value of different kinds of capital, which itself determines, at any moment, the forces liable to be engaged in these struggles. (Bourdieu, 1996, p. 215).

Bourdieu also includes in his analysis a *political field*, which is organised around access to a capital which is specifically political. This field is at times presented as a market where diverse political products are on offer: '... the political field is the site where political products, issues, programmes, analyses, commentaries, concepts, events, are generated in the competition between the agents who are engaged in it, and between which ordinary citizens, now reduced to the status of "consumers", must choose' (Bourdieu in Accardo and Corcuff, 1986, p. 123, my translation). But the political struggle for the monopoly of symbolic violence, for the right to formulate the law, also takes place within the political field. It concerns the appropriation of the political capital 'which allows those who possess it a form of private appropriation of public goods and services (residences, cars, hospitals, schools, etc.)' (Bourdieu, 1994, p. 33, my translation).

The introduction of this political capital brings us closer to the welfare field, whose dynamic would not make sense if we did not add a political capital to the list of relevant resources considered by Bourdieu. The control over the delivery of a particular social programme constitutes both a resource within this welfare field and a major stake within it. Political capital also involves a capacity to speak authoritatively for a large category of people who, furthermore, can be mobilised collectively for exercising pressure. This political resource is used, for instance, to influence the level of benefits.

But another 'power resource' matters in the welfare field: the capacity of agents in the field to accede to 'individuals' in order to mould their behaviour. This capacity is required by a range of social policy programmes. It represents a special form of power and it needs to be added to the resources which form both a resource and a stake in the welfare field. This form of power capital belongs to another intellectual tradition, associated with the name of Michel Foucault, but it can be conceptualised in terms of Bourdieu's framework. In the past, people such as doctors and priests possessed the cultural and symbolic capital which enabled them to patronise those they dealt with and command access to their privacy. This relationship was elaborated on the basis of a habitus organised around trust and deference. Nowadays this power of access to individuals is more likely to take place within a bureaucratic field and it mobilises the 'state capital' which, as we will see, constitutes a concentration of diverse types of capital.

The welfare situation activates a wide range of micro-powers, of practices which aim at normalising. Relief programmes are nearly always based on investigatory and classificatory practices: policing the failure to

maintain dependants, testing the availability for 'work' or spying for undisclosed cohabitation illustrate such technologies of control. A wide range of highly personalised features of supervision and control have been set in place, and the main normalising agents in the welfare field are doctors, teachers and social workers. But, according to Foucault, power should not be viewed simply as prohibitive, or stigmatising, as it also positively contributes to constructing reality. A good example of this constituting capacity of power is given by Donzelot (1979), an associate of Foucault, in his analysis of the family. He studied the process through which the family in France was shaped into a particular pattern: the process through which social relations were moulded in a familial form.

Constructing the bourgeois family has demanded access of diverse agencies to, and a deep penetration of, the domestic unit. It largely depended on the alliance of the doctor with the mother: promoting domestic nursing, encouraging maternal breast-feeding, advising on hygiene and sanitary habits in the home, etc. For the lower class, this constitution of the family was achieved by the 'social inquiry', by the accumulation of personal and detailed information for assistance practices, for the protection of endangered children, the surveillance of delinquent children and also nowadays for divorce proceedings. Donzelot further contends that the penetration of the familial unit is now effectuated by counsellors and therapists. After the priest and the doctor, these personages have become the new directors of conscience and, more essentially, agents of normalisation in the tutelage exercised by the welfare state. Welfare agencies have turned to psychoanalytic procedures, to what Foucault calls *technologies of self*. Social policy programmes secure access to families and individuals, and fashion them for their own purposes. In brief, welfare recipients are shaped as individuals through the welfare state. This analysis illustrates the relevance of such a 'power capital' which commands access to individuals and fashions them.

What is at stake in the welfare field?

The structure of a field corresponds to the distribution of capital whose possession enhances the chances of appropriating the capital which forms the stake in the field. Bourdieu's work on education and on the cultural field in general clearly points to the accumulation of symbolic capital as the central stake. He further equates symbolic capital with legitimacy: when the possession of any kind of capital is justified not only in the eyes of those who benefit most from its distribution, but also in the eyes of those who are most deprived of it. In that sense, symbolic capital is always associated with *misrecognition*.

The idea that the welfare state produces legitimacy and mass loyalty has been central to the analysis of the emergence and development of the welfare state. One may turn to Habermas in order to clarify this view. Habermas (1987) puts forward a fairly conventional analysis of the welfare state and he analyses it in terms of the pacification of class relations. The latter occurs through mechanisms of compensation. Employees are pacified, as private consumers, by material rewards; voters are pacified, as clients of welfare agencies, through social benefits. Habermas underlines here the trade-off on which rests the welfare state: social rewards are exchanged for compliance with the economic and political requirements of the system. Habermas gives us an important insight into what is at stake in the welfare state. For him, the welfare state represents an institution through which legitimacy is exchanged for monetary rewards. He is talking about the conversion of one kind of resource into another type.

The theme of conversion occupies a central position in Bourdieu's framework. He has pointed out the changing value of the diverse elements of cultural capital, such as diplomas. For him, the relative value of a particular type of capital represents a stake in the struggle: social agents with a specific type of capital must ensure the recognition of its value. They use the capital they possess in order to maximise the capital which counts in a particular field. The stake concerns the rate of exchange of one type of capital into another. Bourdieu explicitly develops this theme of convertibility in the context of his analysis of the field of power: ... 'the field of power determines the relative value of different kinds of capital (for instance, the 'rate of exchange' between cultural and economic capital)' (Bourdieu, 1994, p. 56, my translation).

This theme of convertibility is quite frequently referred to, but never systematically elaborated. Bourdieu has acknowledged the difficulty of formulating precise statements in this respect. He wrote: 'For instance, I constantly raise the problem of conversion of one kind of capital into another, in terms that do not completely satisfy even me ... What are the laws governing that conversion? What defines the exchange rate at which one kind of capital is converted into another?' (Bourdieu, 1993, pp. 33–4). The quest for such general laws is bound to remain elusive. The main parameters for the conversion of types of capital are set in the field of power. But the concrete modalities of this conversion and the exact rates at which they are effectuated depend on the particular fields in which they occur. 'That is, at the very least, the extent and ease of convertibility must be quite different in different contexts' (Calhoun, 1993, p. 68). Calhoun is referring here to the historical variability of this conver-

sion. But it also suggests that capital conversions are more crucial in some fields than in others. It is here postulated that the conversion of forms of capital appears particularly central to the welfare field. This occurs mainly because the state, which occupies a central place in the welfare field, possesses what Bourdieu calls a *meta-capital*. 'The concentration of different kinds of capital ... leads to the production of a specific type of capital, a state capital, which enables the State to exercise its power over the various fields and over the different kinds of capital, more particularly over the rates of exchange (and, consequently, over the relations of force between those who possess them)' (Bourdieu, 1994, p. 109, my translation). For this reason, all major kinds of capital are involved in the welfare field and their conversion forms the core of agents' strategies.

The rate of conversion between economic and symbolic capital represents the main stake for the state in the welfare field. It has to ensure the highest level of legitimacy for its social expenditures. But diverse agents in the field operate with different types of capital: doctors, teachers, social workers, sometimes priests, those at the receiving end of welfare benefits. They also aim at converting the resources they possess into the kinds of capital which they seek to accumulate. The stakes in the welfare field are multiple. Instead of considering that agents in the field mobilise their resources to accumulate the capital which forms the stake of the struggle in the welfare field, it seems preferable to envisage a situation in which various types of capital are converted into each other, simultaneously.

Agents and habitus

Agents are able to act in the field only because they possess the necessary resources to produce effects within it. They hold a position in the structure of the field, as determined by the type and volume of resources they possess, and this position governs the way they play within it, but not mechanically or automatically. External conditions shape the activity of agents through a habitus. The latter is sometimes defined as a set of inculcated or even embodied dispositions; sometimes it is presented as a scheme which provides the categories of perception and evaluation. In any case, the habitus constitutes the principle according to which practices are generated. It is through the habitus that agents in the field respond meaningfully to how a situation develops; they improvise a course of action, initiate unexpected moves. They display autonomy and flexibility mainly because they evolve within a world which is characterised by some looseness. Agents have, in this context, recourse to strategies as the situation develops and they steer a course between alternatives. 'The focus of analysis, therefore, could no longer be on the ways in

which agents adapted themselves to the requirements of objective structures and regulations in any society but on the ways in which agents strategically worked the system of temporarily dominant structures…' (Robbins, 1991, p. 81). Such strategies do not imply any conscious calculation; rather, they activate dispositions and classifications. Bourdieu has called the habitus 'an art of invention', to emphasize that it implies an active and creative relation to the world. It must be pointed out that Bourdieu's framework is sometimes criticised for being deterministic; but this is strongly denied by Bourdieu himself.

In a sense, the habitus represents the point of crystallisation of the structure of domination and of the play of power. As the mediating concept between the structure of the field and the practices within it, it translates relations of domination into power, into access to those resources which are at stake in the field. The habitus can be seen as the embodiment of what Bourdieu calls a 'cultural arbitrary'; this refers to the classificatory schemes, the mode of interpretation of the social world which the dominant groups uphold and impose. As a generative matrix of practices, the habitus is already shaped by symbolic power for it involves the inculcated representations that social agents have of the social world. The practices and strategies which are generated on the basis of the habitus carry the mark of power in two ways: they manifest the structure of domination which is embodied in the habitus and they participate in the struggle through which the structure of the field (the distribution of relevant capital) is maintained or transformed.

In the welfare field, the concept of habitus becomes particularly relevant at the point of contact between social policy agencies and clients. Welfare agencies and welfare clients belong to a structure of domination, but one which is largely misrecognised. Bourdieu's notion of 'misrecognition' simply indicates, in this context, that the relationship between administrative agencies and welfare recipients, which is organised in terms of control, is misrecognised as caring. Misrecognition is of course not accidental: it activates symbolic structures which are incorporated in the habitus and are likely to ensure compliance. But the effectiveness of such a misrecognition should not be exaggerated. For the strategies of control which are used by welfare agencies, and to which misrecognition belongs, are often met with strategies of resistance. As soon as reference is made to control, mechanisms of resistance to control come into operation. This implies that a system of control is immediately transformed into a site of struggle; such a struggle develops at the interface of the interaction between welfare agencies and welfare recipients.

Strategies of control and resistance should not necessarily be perceived

as intentional, for they are enacted through routine practices which are generated by a habitus. Two sets of practices are implicated here: one engendered by the habitus of those who deliver social benefits and services, the other by the habitus of those who receive such benefits and have to cope with official agencies. In fact, diverse habitus are probably involved in each category, as both providers and recipients do not constitute uniform categories. The habitus of either welfare recipients or welfare agents do not simply produce a practice, as if they were mechanically determined by the position in the field. The habitus produces strategies, because it operates in a context of indeterminacy: 'The habitus goes hand in glove with vagueness and indeterminacy' (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 77). It produces a 'feel for the game'. 'This "feel for the game", as we call it, is what enables an infinite number of "moves" to be made, adapted to the infinite number of possible situations which no rule, however complex, can foresee' (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 9). This implies choosing the best possible course of action, but not one based on a rational calculation of interest. This 'feel for the game' provides an orientation, within the context of general dispositions which constitute the habitus. 'This word, strategies, evidently has to be stripped of its naively teleological connotations: types of behaviour can be directed towards certain ends without being consciously directed to these ends, or determined by them. The notion of habitus was invented, if I may say so, in order to account for this paradox' (Bourdieu, 1990, pp. 9–10).

Within the welfare field, a distinction is drawn between means-tested, contributory and universal benefits. In the first case, welfare recipients seek access to a range of social benefits and services. They endeavour to obtain the highest possible level of benefits, that is to say, of economic capital. But as such benefits depend on means-tests, recipients may well respond to the practices of control through strategies of resistance. They also aim at minimising the stigma which goes with taking up social benefits, to reduce or even eliminate negative symbolic capital. Bourdieu's model of the field applies to this situation. Welfare recipients, although they cannot mobilise resources to act effectively, occupy an objective position in the welfare field. Their position is defined, like anyone else's by the distribution of the existing capital and also by the access to the capital that such social agents strive to accumulate. However, lack of capital transforms them into objects of welfare. The way this powerlessness and dependency is experienced may create a habitus, a matrix which routinely generates the practice of welfare clients. This does not mean that welfare recipients necessarily comply with the procedures set up by the relevant agencies. They may turn to a range of strategies in the way they

handle the relevant agencies. The field in which they evolve is still characterised by struggle.

The habitus of welfare recipients is mirrored by that of the officials who deliver such means-tested benefits and services. These officials police access to social benefits, ensuring that only those with a legitimate entitlement receive them. They operated in a field with a political capital, and the exercise of their power immediately produces stigma, negative symbolic capital for their clients. The mechanisms of control and stigmatisation become the focus of a resistance which must be overcome or neutralised by the administrative agencies. The position of such administrative agencies in the welfare field leads to the development of an 'administrative habitus'. This habitus does not correspond to a bureaucratic ethos, which would simply reflect the internal mode of operation of an organisation. It is based on the distance which separates, in their objective position, officials and their clients. It is deeply rooted in the structure of the welfare field and cannot be presented as an issue of organisational effectiveness.

The above comments do not apply to those benefits which are based on contributions or on social insurance schemes. In such cases, the relationship between administrative agencies and clients conforms to a contract in which rules and regulations are clearly defined. Benefits are calculated on the basis of recorded contributions and leave hardly any room for discretion. One imagines that a rather different habitus emerges in this context for both administrators and clients. The interface of social policy agencies and clients also acquires a very different character with universal social policy programmes. The beneficiaries of such services rely on a language of 'rights', according to which they expect and receive an automatic entitlement to such services. They are mainly interested in the quality of the services to which they are entitled. They are faced by professional providers of services, such as medical doctors or teachers, who enjoy a high level of legitimacy. This does not mean that this situation cannot be conceptualised in terms of control and resistance to control. But this control is more likely to be misrecognised and assumed under the category of care. It activates, in any case, a rather different kind of habitus, for both providers and clients.

Far from being uniform, the welfare field is composed of many subfields. One frequently finds, within the same welfare system, some social policy programmes which are based on the insurance principle, and some which rely on means-testing. Each social policy area, of health, education, social security, etc., not only displays a different structure but activates very different habitus and may involve different stakes, albeit within

the context of a similar structure of domination. Even recipients of welfare benefits vary according to their *trajectory*, that is to say according to the successive positions they have occupied, according to the changes they have experienced in the volume and composition of the capital they possess.

THE REQUIREMENTS OF A SOCIOLOGY OF WELFARE

It is contended in this article that the model of 'welfare field', which is derived from Bourdieu's mode of analysis, offers a realistic and efficient approach to the elaboration of a sociology of welfare. It is not claimed that this model represents the only path for such a construction. However, all the models which have been put forward in the past (and which centred around one form or another of modernisation theory or revolved around marxist versions) do not provide a satisfactory medium for this task. More recent discourses on welfare present at best elements of such a construction and remain partial. We now need to make good such claims.

The first and, I would think, absolute requirement of an adequate sociological framework demands that welfare institutions and practices be placed in their wider social context. But such a model must also grasp the internal dynamic of welfare activities. We face here a double requirement, and an adequate framework should satisfy both. A perspective which examines the welfare system in its own terms does not meet this requirement. This is the case for what Mishra (1977, ch. 1) has called the *social administration* approach, which does not place welfare activities firmly within its broader social context. But the social insertion of the welfare system must not lead to a neglect or bypassing of the specific logic at work in the welfare domain. Most perspectives fail to pass this test. The modernisation approach, mainly in the form of convergence theory, has had wide currency in the comparative study of welfare: welfare development and the forms of welfare system were explained in terms of the single logic of industrialism. Marxism, in whatever form, granted little autonomy to welfare. The welfare system was directly inserted in the existing social relations which structure society as a whole. What happens within this domain fundamentally reflects the social relations structuring advanced capitalist societies and refers back, quite directly, to the conflict between the two major classes in capitalist class structure is reproduced.

Recent contributions from social theory to the analysis of welfare do not fare any better in fulfilling this double requirement. They certainly set welfare in its broad social context, but they do not retain the specificity of

the welfare domain. Michel Foucault views the welfare state as a central mechanism in an over-all process of normalisation. Habermas writes about welfare in the context of the colonisation of the lifeworld, as part of the tension between two modes of coordination of social relations. What happens within this sphere of activity is accounted for in terms of a single, encompassing process characterising society as a whole. Feminist analysis of the welfare state has rapidly developed in the recent past, and includes many different angles and approaches. Such studies point to the gender biases on which such policies are based. The main social policy programmes are characterised as patriarchal because they reflect and also sustain the gender division of labour. Such studies point to the differences between men and women in terms of access to welfare benefits or of the effect of social policy programmes. Growing attention is also given to the fact that the welfare state is shaped by women; some writers would emphasise that social policy empowers the most vulnerable women (Gordon, 1990). The focus remains in all cases on gender relations, and the welfare state is seen either as part of the structure which ensures the domination of men over women, or else as an arena where the struggle over gender relations unfolds.

In all these cases, welfare is analysed not in its own terms but in terms of an all-encompassing process at work in society as a whole. In other words, the welfare system is reduced to the general dynamic of society, of which it becomes an unmediated part. This direct insertion does not allow such perspectives to hold to what is specific to the welfare scene, to grasp its internal logic. This radical reduction undermines the possibility of precise statements about welfare activities; the richness, concreteness and complexity of the welfare scene is lost in the process.

The concept of welfare field satisfies this double requirement. In a sense, it has been elaborated for this purpose. The welfare field takes its place within the broad field of social formation, but it also constitutes a differentiated domain of activity. The differentiation of the welfare field is manifested by the configuration of agents which operate within it, the resources which are mobilised, and by the stakes around which struggles develop. All these factors set in motion an internal dynamic, a logic of welfare activity. In that sense, the extent of differentiation and autonomy of the welfare field remains an empirical question. The way the concept of field has been elaborated by Bourdieu brings this dual aspect of insertion and specificity right to the fore of the analysis.

A sociology of welfare must also identify the relevant forces which operate within this domain of activity and shape it. Bourdieu has elaborated the concept of field with the main goal of accounting for social practices

in terms of habitus, themselves fashioned by objective structures. The analysis demands that one identifies the main players in the field and the strategies in which they are engaged. These players include macro-agents which clash over the constitution of the field, and those agents of micro-power and counter-powers which manifest themselves at the local level, in the context of the organisation and delivery of social benefits.

The third requirement which must be satisfied by a sociological framework concerns its ability to handle the major questions relevant for sociology. These are as follows.

Welfare development/welfare effort

Numerous case studies and comparative analyses have addressed the single intellectual issue which has for long dominated welfare studies: that of welfare development. The factors influencing welfare effort, the mechanisms involved, the major forces at work have all been delved into. Why are social policy programmes more developed in some countries than in others? The literature has grown large, but the question has not been answered and the debate remains open (see for instance Jones, 1985). The model of the welfare field focuses on the configurations of agents active in the welfare field. It can address the question of deciding which formation of players in the field favours or hinders welfare development. The challenge of this type of analysis consists in showing how the strategies of capital accumulation utilised by the respective agents in the field promote or block welfare development.

Welfare mix and welfare regime

The issue of welfare effort, which monopolised attention for a long time, has been replaced by an interest in the qualitative differences which exist between welfare systems. Welfare systems differ not only in terms of the proportion of the national wealth which goes into social services. They differ mainly in terms of their internal features, in terms of the way they are organised and operate. For each case, the question has become: what kind of welfare system is it? One response to this question has consisted in elaborating classifications which endeavour to map out qualitative differences between welfare systems (Esping-Andersen, 1990; Ferrera, 1996). The other response has been of outlining their 'welfare mix': the way the state, market mechanisms and the diverse agencies within the civil society combine to produce social benefits and services (Esping-Andersen, 1990; Pinker 1992; Sainsbury 1994). The precise welfare mix which emerges for each social programme is to a large extent determined by the configuration of participating agents, the volume and types of capital

they command and also by the conversions of capital around which struggles crystallise.

The effect of welfare on the structuration of society

In a sense, the issue of social stratification and of class structure has been closely associated with welfare studies. For a very long time, it was considered that social programmes were meant to reduce and possibly eradicate social inequalities. Such programmes were routinely evaluated in terms of how effectively they redistributed wealth and social advantages. That most welfare systems, in some way, redistribute income can probably be accepted, although such a statement has been seriously challenged (Le Grand, 1982; Ringen, 1987). But the view that the welfare system is *meant* to reallocate wealth strikes one as naive. Only recently has the impact of social programmes on the structuration of society been taken seriously, beyond simple considerations of income redistribution. The work of Esping-Andersen (1990) appears from this point of view very relevant. It aims at showing that different types of welfare system have their own ways of shaping the class structure of the society to which they belong. The boundaries between social classes are, to some extent, traced by the effects of social programmes.

The model of welfare field revolves around the structure of distribution of diverse types of capital, and around the mechanisms through which various types of capital are converted into each other. It is, from the start, formulated in terms of structure and stratification, as it equates structure with the unequal distribution in the volume and types of capital. The dynamic of the welfare field is rooted in the accumulation of types of capital through a process of conversion. This model also accounts for the contribution of welfare to the gender structuration of society. The feminist literature on welfare has directed its attention to this issue. The 'welfare field' model may point, for instance, to the way economic capital is channelled towards men or women in social policy programmes.

Another issue has arisen concerning the impact of the welfare system on the structure of society. It relates to the possible existence of an *underclass:* a category of people who find themselves on the margins of society, most of them permanently unemployed and dependent on welfare assistance, with little prospect of social reintegration, etc. The concept of underclass proves troublesome, but it could be clarified, operationalised and tested. The presence of a particular 'habitus' attached to those who depend on welfare on a long-term basis, of a matrix which generates this kind of practice, provides the best indicator of such an underclass.

Interaction between welfare agencies and welfare recipients

The interaction between social policy agencies and their clients has not been investigated in any depth. We cannot turn to an extensive and consistent body of knowledge about this central relationship (Ham and Hill, 1993, ch. 8; Hasenfeld *et al.* 1987). It is none the less at this micro-level that the practices and strategies of agents in the field develop. Bourdieu's concept of habitus offers a significant tool for grasping the nature of this interaction. The mechanisms of stigmatisation, the technologies of control and welfare policing, the rate of take-up of welfare benefits, the forms of resistance which develop in this context, all these stand at the core of the sociological analysis of welfare.

CONCLUSION

In this article, I have argued that an adaptation of Bourdieu's model of *field* offers a promising and realistic tool for the analysis of welfare institutions and practices. It sets welfare in its social context, while at the same time grasping the internal structure of welfare activity. It identifies the forces and mechanisms which shape the welfare system. It can account for the level and type of welfare development and examine the impact of welfare institutions and practices on society. These questions figure high on the agenda of any sociological investigation of welfare. The strength of the model which has been presented lies in that it deals in a unifying way with a range of questions which are usually analysed separately, which are treated as discrete issues.

The model is also parsimonious. It constitutes a manageable framework, which includes only a few concepts and points to a limited range of mechanisms. It forms a simple model, without ever becoming simplistic. I do not think that it unduly reduces the complexity of welfare activity. I have in fact emphasised that it fully takes into account the specificity of the welfare system. This simple, manageable model does a great deal of work, and it fare well in terms of its range of application and its depth. It is not claimed that Bourdieu's model offers the only acceptable way of developing a general sociology of welfare, but that it provides a particularly effective tool to this end.

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