Conversation

Bourdieu, the Bourdieusans and the Question of Youth. Jean-Louis Fabiani and Alexandra Kowalski in Conversation

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Abstract

On the occasion of the publication of Pierre Bourdieu. A Heroic Structuralism,1 we try to highlight the main elements of Bourdieu’s thought on youth as well as Jean-Claude Chamboredon and Jean-Louis Fabiani’s both close and different approach to the topic. The format of the conversation allows us to tackle related issues about youth in France today and the constraints inherent to structuralist thinking.

What is Youth?

Alexandra Kowalski (AK): Youth, “la jeunesse” in French, is not just a stage of life. It’s a construct that emerged as a common theme in the 1960s, a decade when the effects of post-war policies of mass education started being felt globally. As you once reminded the readers of the newspaper *Le Monde* in a piece about the pop singer and phenomenon Johnny Halliday,² the theme resonated in France with a culturally specific tone. Youth culture, first, was cast somewhat ironically as *la culture “jeune”*. The sixties were dubbed _années yéyé_, or “yeah-yeah” years, because these expressions seemed to be the motto of a popular culture drenched in Americanisms—or so it sounded to the skeptical ears of older generations anyway. The emergence of youth as a socio-economic category also translated into a social problem that resonated with a unique vibrancy in the last years of de Gaulle’s France: I am thinking of course of the political militancy and violent clashes that crystallized in May 1968.

Jean-Louis Fabiani (JLF): This is right. I was born in the early 1950s and remember quite well the change of mood that started in the mid-sixties. The end of the war of Liberation in Algeria (1962) coincided with the economic expansion of the Gaullist era, which led to a form of consumerist society unheard of. The welfare state created just after the World War 2 was fully in place and its conjunction with economic growth produced huge changes in French society: quick urbanization of a country that had remained one of the most rural in Western Europe, modernization of the economy boosted by the first version of the European Union. Of course, brutal change produced a lot of discontents. You are right to point out the role of education. Adolescents belonging to working classes used to leave school at age 14 and enter the labor market. Mandatory education was extended to 16 and more and more kids got a secondary school education in a system that had been conceived for the cultivated bourgeoisie (classics remained central in the curriculum long after they were no longer mandatory). This cultural clash was huge. It is partly accounted for in Bourdieu and Passeron’s books *The Inheritors* (1964) and *Reproduction* (1970);³ they showed that mass education promoters ignored that the main assets to be successful remained within early family socialization, through

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the possession of cultural capital. After May 68, it was said that both books could account for the huge student unrest that occurred in France. At least, the authors’ critical eye allowed readers to see that the Gaullist era was not the educational paradise described by the new technocracy. I have often had the occasion to say that the early Bourdieu could not be explained without a reference to the relationship between critical sociology (a notion to appear later), and the Gaullist power. This is exactly what your mentor Craig Calhoun wrote: from the *Inheritors to Distinction*, Bourdieu gave a remarkable critical account of France during the *Trente Glorieuses*.

**AK:** Despite the theme’s social prominence in those years, and despite the centrality of education in his work on social reproduction, Bourdieu took into account the category of “youth” only late and only briefly, in an interview published in 1978.

**JLF:** Excellent remark. The 1978 interview is quite interesting, but it belongs to a specific “genre” in Bourdieu’s work: a short interview where he opens a huge topic (like sport) and closes it at the end. As a teenager in the 1960s, I was convinced that I belonged to a category that had never existed before in France: we were many, we had some pocket money and we bought records, we could afford a trip to England which looked like a cultural exoticism and, to some extent, a sexual paradise. I listened to the radio show *Salut les copains* every day after school and grew my hair. This is well analyzed in Jean-Claude Chamboredon’s book chapter on French Society and its Youth in Bourdieu’s edited book (under a pseudonym, Darras), *Le partage des bénéfices* in 1966, untranslated into English if I am not mistaken. The author develops a rather complex analysis: on the one hand the theme of a unified youth that would share a common culture is clearly ideological (class barriers have not disappeared; young urban bourgeois are still completely different from young rural people). On the other hand, youth is not merely an illusion. It is possible to grasp objective changes that go beyond class distinction (in terms of clothing, or musical tastes, for instance). Chamboredon notes that the models of familial authority are being challenged by a new behavior, mostly generated by the extension of schooling. Being young was a monopoly of the bourgeoisie, so to speak: this time of indetermination and transition was not possible for the dominated classes. The feeling of belonging to Youth as a category largely depends on the space of possibilities opened by education; the perception of

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the future is increasingly unclear for a good part of the cohorts. Chamboredon shows all the discontents produced by the lag between how Youth is ideologically manufactured by new capitalism and the returns that the young people can expect. He has precocious remarks about gender (a topic far from being prominent in the early Bourdieu school): girls are more likely to suffer from the indetermination of adolescence, as the gap between the promises of a new era and the harsh reality of the job market is quite wider for them.

A Matter of Classification through Stages of Life

AK: The text of the interview makes it clear that the question of age and of generations was for Bourdieu a question of distinctions, of classes and classifications which actors use to position themselves in certain social hierarchies. It makes it also clear that the question of “la jeunesse” in contemporary society derives from the transformation of the educational system in the sense of accessibility and complexity which muddles the perception of inequalities, thereby perpetuating them.

JLF: This is clear. Bourdieu was preoccupied from the start by classification. He owed the theme to Durkheimians and their pioneering work on “primitive classifications”. In his structuralist view, youth as an emerging category was the expression of morphological changes in the educational system. Here again he was close to Durkheim. He never stopped criticizing the myths underlying the French Republican system, the democratic illusion, the meritocracy, and the everlasting ignorance concerning the role of family and class origin in early socialization.

AK: Why wasn’t the question of age and the life course more explicitly present in his work? Did he view it as a derivative of broader, general-theoretical questions of social reproduction? In your recent book, Pierre Bourdieu. A Heroic Structuralism, you note that the theory of habitus grants primacy to primary socialization—could the concept have acted as a sort of blinder masking the complexity, the interest, and the centrality of childhood/youth in postindustrial societies? One wonders also if this snub might have been an act of scientific distinction vis-à-vis media-friendly sociologists, the ones he would denounce much later, in his essay on TV among others, as intellectuels médiatiques prone to throw around the notion of youth uncritically?

JLF: Both answers must be considered. As I have said before, Bourdieu’s main aim was to produce a universal theory of society based on three main
interconnected concepts, habitus, field, and capital. For him, the sustainability of what he called “the primitive experience of the social world” was the key to all social issues. In his seminars, he kept saying: “First look at the father’s occupation”. He thought that social background could explain everything. A part of my dissertation was devoted to connecting the social origins of philosophers with their theoretical choices. It was a bit reductionist, and I quickly abandoned the idea, but it shows you to what extent he thought that early socialization was determining for all the life-course. Obviously, he had the foresight not to ignore that later events in life can produce effects: his concept of cleft habitus, which he developed rather late in his career and that he applied mostly to his own case, is an attempt to solve the dilemma involved in applying a structural grid to changing situations. But if you are a full-fledged structuralist, you don’t give much importance about micro-situations.

Your second remark is accurate. Bourdieu was from the start a harsh critic of the journalistic view of the world, particularly the belief in constant change or permanent novelty. For instance, his booklet on television is the last moment in a life-long scorn for impressionism conveyed by the journalist’s eye. Thus, “la montée des jeunes” (upheaval of the young) or “la lutte des générations” (generational struggle), promoted by Edgar Morin, a popular sociologist at the time, was his permanent target. In the book chapter I mentioned, Chamboredon was subtler: he did the ideological critique that was needed, but then he noted that youth was not a mere illusion.

**AK:** In any case, it was mostly up to Bourdieu’s disciples to produce a sociology of “youth”, of its various ages, and of the specific modes of socialization involved in the long transition that separates biological birth from adulthood in contemporary societies. JC Chamboredon (1966) and yourself (1977) in particular invested that terrain. What was the spirit in which you embarked on your research of early childhood and children’s literature? The question is partly about the place of the subject in the small Bourdieuan world of the time, but also more largely in French sociology generally as well as your own personal intellectual growths. Did you go about it with a sense of an important and under-explored societal field, or were you mostly deploying a Bourdieuan

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research program on education? I wonder also what was the place—in your minds and libraries—of the field of youth studies that was blooming in Anglo-American sociology and cultural studies at the time.

**JLF:** In Bourdieu’s circle, there was a strong division of labor. He said to me once, to my distress: Please leave theory to me, as I had written a very ambitious paper. He was a militant of the de-hierarchization of objects, but the minor topics were mostly left to the “entering” disciples. This was a huge chance for me. I picked up objects that were totally unknown in French sociology, jazz and children’s books, for instance, and I published articles that were noticed in my mid-twenties. This are the main reasons why I remained faithful to Bourdieu, despite growing theoretical divergences. Bourdieu opened a new space in French sociology. Don’t forget that he published the first article of Bruno Latour in 1977. *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, his journal, were a kind of hot-house. Almost all of us left (Passeron, Baudelot, Establet, Boltanski, Grignon, Chamboredon, Thévenot, Heinich) but at some point, it was a very creative place. Concerning children, it was originally Chamboredon’s idea. He had little kids at the time, and he showed me “pre-reading” books with a lot of art in them (you know, Maurice Sendak, Leo Lionni, Tomi Ungerer). He was mainly interested in changes related to the investment in early childhood by parents, and I paid a lot of attention to artforms in everyday life. We started our collaboration in a workshop for students. This was my first sociological work; as Chamboredon was very busy at the time, he let me do all the interviews with publishers and artists. It was a perfect case of an emerging field with sharp contrasts among publishing houses in terms of economic capital, social characteristics and varieties of public. I found structural homologies everywhere, as a good disciple. However, I think that our description was accurate and that we gave a nice account of the quickly changing forms of investment in early childhood. In France, the article was a huge success, mainly among librarians, but also a wider public. At 26, without a Ph.D. degree, I was invited to national talk shows; my mother took me seriously for the first time. In retrospect, I think that the article, which was unusually long, was simultaneously a perfect illustration of Bourdieu’s theory and an attempt to, let’s say, question the model from within. Chamboredon was convinced that we should produce more accurate work on childhood. He was inspired by the French historian Philippe Ariès, whose *Centuries of Childhood* was a landmark for him. Youth was not only a word for him; it was a process that deserved historical and sociological investigation. In preparing the interview, something came to my attention for the first time after

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all these years. We published *Les albums pour enfants* in 1977 and Bourdieu published “La jeunesse n’est qu’un mot” (Youth is only a word) in 1978. Perhaps it was an answer from the shepherd to the shepherdess, but I am not sure.

As for cultural studies, we were absolutely ignorant. This is a paradox since Richard Hoggart was very well known to us. Passeron introduced him in France as a sociologist, and we had no idea about the Birmingham school. I read Stuart Hall only in the 1990s. Now I am starting a research on the multiplication of studies in the last half century and what I call after Peter Galison scientific disunity. In the late 1970s, we thought that we were creating a new Durkheimian school and also investing time in really serious matters.

**AK:** Your and JC Chamboredon’s work show both strong continuities and important departures from Bourdieu’s sociology. On the one hand, the central question remains that of reproduction through culture and the production of symbolic boundaries within a world of institutional and class power. On the other hand, your fine, empirically driven sociographies and ethnographies of childhood bring insights and open pathways that are far from redundant in their conclusions with other types of Bourdieuan works. There is in particular a sense that the social definitions of childhood result from micro-dynamics that are internal to an autonomous field of symbolic production (one might call it the field of childhood, within the broader educational field), and that can therefore not be entirely subsumed under indiscriminate, society-wide forces of reproduction. These internal dynamics are not only a function of emerging professional worlds in education, psychology, publishing, but also the transformation of gender roles in families, variable as well as convergent across social classes. I’m struck by the role of women in the process of field-formation in particular, as it comes forth through your and Chamboredon’s texts on “prime childhood”.

**JLF:** You are an acute reader. I will not speak for Chamboredon, who died last year, but we had many ideas in common. He was more of a Marxist, and I was more of an interactionist, but we agreed on the importance of micro-processes. We were close to historians. I have published my most important articles in *Annales*, the flagship journal of the French historical school. I had a long conversation with micro-historians in summer schools and workshops and slowly moved away from structuralism. In many ways, we were really Bourdieuan in that article. We tried to show the process of autonomization with precision. And we took autonomy at its face value: an aesthetic, pedagogical and social place was created and functioned with its own rules. Besides, we showed as different types of knowledge were involved and different types of authority emerged in the ways by which an educational project was constructed. What we called “avant-garde” publishers
went to the limits of freedom of expression as they dealt with topics that were not thought to be appropriated for small kids. We showed that audacity was a quite bourgeois idea. In retrospect, I wonder why we were so weak on gender issues, as they were already prominent. I would do differently today, no doubt.

**Youth, Socialization, History**

**AK:** Let’s go back for a moment to the general sociology of youth. From the onset of the 1978 interview, Bourdieu frames the question of youth and generations decisively as an historical and sociological variable. He cites historians such as Duby in support of the view that youth, as an extended and complex period of socialization, was in the Middle Ages an invention of dominant actors within the dominant classes, one which served to keep younger contenders for power at bay, in a state of prolonged minority status. The rest of the article strongly suggests (although it doesn’t make the point fully explicit), that youth is a unique feature of contemporary (let’s call them postindustrial) political economies. This is an aspect that your work on childhood has substantiated and elaborated.

**JLF:** I agree with Bourdieu on this point. Youth is the consequence of a historical process. Everybody would agree with this level of generality. What matters is the fact that youth is an interstitial category: you are not mature yet, but you have prospects. As I said, before, prospects are not evenly distributed in society. There is always a distinction between objective chances and subjective evaluation of possibilities. Many generational conflicts are triggered by the growing gap between subjective and objective. Bourdieu thought that there was a sort of pre-reflexive adjustment between subjective and objective. However, in some of his texts, he acknowledges that clashes exist, and that they are the main cause of revolutionary situations. Thus, youth may have very different meanings in different social and historical situations: I would say that it is a sort of waiting room for dominant groups: young people are placed in interstitial situations and they wait until they can be full adults, that is to say hold power. There are many strategies designed by people in power to postpone the adulthood of younger generations: look at the poor Prince of Wales, Charles. At 73 he is still in the waiting room. He is still young, so to speak. His mother has postponed the moment of coronation, he is still preparing to reign. In History, being young is to a large extent a consequence of how long your father lives. In Ancient Rome, a guy aged 60 who had his father was a minor according to law.

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A 16-year old orphan was an adult. The definition of youth is as variable as the definition of old age: it depends on the relative weight of different generations at the same time, on life expectancy and on class position. Basically, youth is a transitional age. It may be short or non-existent, or it may be unending. I would connect youth to the valuation of life: some lives matter much more than others and make great room for youth, even everlasting youth. Poor lives are still deprived of youth, as they have to struggle in a world that permits no transition. Allowing all people to have a fruitful youth is still a huge political project.

Where Is Youth at Today?

**AK:** My latter questions bring up the issue of another historical transformation: what happened to youth and the young since the 1960s, especially in the past twenty or thirty years? For one, the context has changed radically as a result of the spread of neoliberal ideals and reforms. In fact, as Nancy Fraser put it, we are not even any longer in the age of “progressive neoliberalism.” Culture and public education are being defunded and privatized. Education even likely to lose its character as “mass” education in the coming decade, under the joint pressure of rising inequalities and generalized digitalization. Would you be able to say if the social uses, functions, or definition of youth are changing or have already changed?

**JLF:** Big question. Again, let’s be careful about an oversimplified definition of youth. Class, gender and race matter a lot and produce quite different types of youth. I would say that the big difference between the 1960s and now, at least in France, is the end of the illusion of a promising future. Of course, the “invention of youth” in the 1960s was an illusion, as life chances were not that different from those of the previous generations: but there was almost no unemployment, the feeling of liberation, sexual and social, was really strong and largely shared, there was an illusory promise of growing equality. In my generation, many young people discovered long-distance travelling to India or other places: there was a real democratization of spiritual experience. The welfare state still existed and allowed the young generation to do weird things at a limited cost, I can tell you. The following generations’ experience was quite different: growing unemployment, odd jobs, growing discrepancy between credentials and employment, AIDS, environmental crisis and climate change have taken a toll. The growth of inequalities is salient and makes meritocratic ideology a joke. If you agree with my idea of waiting room, we might say that there is

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no exit in the room. Walls are everywhere. In theory, objective conditions exist for generational uprisings. However, besides some spectacular events (think of Youth for climate, for instance), political apathy seems to be dominant. This seems to be an effect of the individualism that neoliberalism pushed to the extreme. Most claims now involve the individual body and its possible transformations. The idea of a massive general collective action does not seem to be in the air, but sociologists are always wrong with their predictions.

Generations and Conflict

**AK:** In recent years media have claimed that a new conflict of generations opposes the youngest (genX, genZ) to boomers. Is this a repetition of the older script of inter-generational conflicts which Bourdieu argued “muddled” conflicts over status and resources, or a novel story altogether shaped by digital communication and new forms of socialization?

There also seems to have been a “racialization” of the meaning of this term since the mid-1990s—we hear a lot about the *jeunes de banlieue* (the young from *banlieues*). Is this a correct perception, and what is at play in this symbolic shift?

**JLF:** The pandemic has showed both remarkable cases of intergenerational solidarity and some anger against the possible overprotection of older generations. The economic crisis has forced a growing number of young people to remain in or to go back to their family home. In Italy, this is becoming a sort of generalized practice. The result is ambivalent: stronger bonds but growing tensions. The conflict of generations is always the manifestation of conflicts over resources or symbols: there are good reasons to think that the growing number of old people having significant resources is a solid ground for conflict. In the meantime, many old people do not look like “boomers” at all, and they live in isolation and poverty. As Youth, Boomer is only a word, and we should not forget that most baby-boomers belonged to dominated classes. Generational conflicts are never analogous to class conflicts, because there are a lot of affects in relationships than result more in silent hatred or individual violence than in organized protest.

Racialization is a new word in France. It has been denied in France for long. Since the urban riots of 2005, which had a clear “racial” dimension, things are different. As it is the case in this type of urban protest, there was no political script, but one can think, as my colleague Gérard Mauger suggests, that it was

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proto-political. In the last fifteen years, generational protest has taken different forms, mostly about police violence. Radical Islam is active among young people, as it offers assets and perspectives to some. One should not overestimate the unity of these movements. There are still strong cleavages that divide these “jeunes de banlieue”. Of course, both moral entrepreneurs and a part of the young people import US scripts and behavior (think of the rap or the investment in sport), but, if I can forecast a high level of conflict in the years to come, I am not sure that the “jeunes de banlieue” will constitute a real political force. Again, you’re always at risk when you ask an old guy to talk about young people.

A Final Word on Structuralism

AK: Let’s get back to Bourdieu and biography/age for a conclusion. You just called him twice a structuralist without much qualification. I must admit I found this a bit shocking! Let’s walk back on that label because your book grapples at length, precisely, with the question of Bourdieu’s structuralism. The resulting picture is rather more complex than the label suggests.

So, the title of the book calls Bourdieu’s structuralism “heroic”, a qualifier you borrow from Randall Collins’ sociology of sociology. Randall Collins inspires you to define Bourdieuan sociology as an intellectual tradition driven by the totemic figure of a “hero”, a founder with charismatic power (which doesn’t exclude authentic intellectual originality of course) whose work may generate a genuine research program but whose image also fosters debates over orthodoxy and heresy along strong symbolic lines.

At the same time, you seem to open the road for a reading of Bourdieu’s theory as a type of “genetic structuralism” (that’s Lucian Goldman’s formula), which makes space for both structure and action, for stasis and change, for structure and time. Your work, which is tuned to interaction and microsociological dynamics and brilliantly illustrates this “structurationist” pathway, resounds very much with my own understanding of Bourdieu’s contribution to social theory. So, in a way Bourdieu’s structuralism may also be seen as “heroic” in the sense that it represents a dialectal totality of action and structure, of change and reproduction, of agency and necessity. Is this an erroneous reading of your thesis?

JLF: Bourdieu’s structuralism is a quite complex issue. On the one hand, one might say that he was one of the first to develop a thorough critique of structuralism as Levi-Strauss constructed it in an objectivist manner. I am still fully convinced by his argument in the Outline of a Theory of Practice, while I am quite skeptical about is view of phenomenology as mere subjectivism. I
think that the idea of superseding both subjectivism and objectivism is a single theoretical construction is rather scholastic. I am ready to accept his critique of Levi-Strauss, as the objectivity of myths that support his structuralism does not make any room to agency. Besides, lodging structures ultimately in the brains of agents is a mysterious answer to the very complex relationship between social agents and the objective world. On the other hand—and here I stand against my many detractors—I feel absolutely right in pointing out that he viewed his general theory as a pure structuralism until the end, although he did not pay much attention to structure in his last works. The last ten years of his life, if you leave aside his activist texts, are devoted to a violent critique of post-structuralism (as it is expressed in science studies, mainly) and, to some extent, to a soft form of functionalism: that’s how I read his tribute to R.K. Merton in his last lectures at the Collège de France. I could say the same about neo-pragmatism that became so popular in the 1990s in France: he was allergic to it, as it could not be integrated in his structuralist frame. I show that in the introduction to my book: it is difficult to think otherwise. When your object is “genetic structuralism” that is, quite strangely, rendered as “constructionist” in the English translation of the famous San Diego lecture in 1986; you cannot avoid the constraints of structuralism. Any social space can be structured in the same way, as an interplay between field, conceived as a positional space, habitus and capital. You can find the structure everywhere. For instance, when Bourdieu speaks of jazz as a “middle brow” art, he implies that the structure of producers, the structure of the audience and the structure of art works are homologous. It may be the case, or not. In my view, sociologists must put this frame to a test. I would not claim that there is no structure, since I used a lot of structural analysis in my work. I just want to say that in certain cases it works quite well, and in other cases, not at all. As for jazz, structuralist approach did not allow Bourdieu to see that the most interesting point was the fact that this illegitimate artform was appropriated by quite legitimate intellectuals, Sartre being the first. With that in mind, I could reconsider the very notion of middle brow art, as perfect homology does not exist in the social world. Levi-Strauss and Bourdieu share the same conception of a very orderly world. But disorder is always present. A structure is a system of transformations, that’s the simplest definition. This does not mean that you can account for historical change on a mere structural basis, as Bourdieu continually does in what I call his historical texts: Homo Academicus, State Nobility and the lectures on state. If you look back at these texts, I am sure that you will agree with me on that point. There is no room for agency, no room for eventfulness, no room for contingency. I know that many sociologists who have done excellent historical sociology (Steinmetz, Calhoun and Gorski among others) will not agree with me.
But I remained close to the texts, and I started doing historical sociology with Bourdieuan tools, in my first book. Soon I realized that it was too reductionist and did not allow me to account for processes.

Why heroic? A Heroic Structuralism was not the initial title. Structuralism was not uppermost in my mind when I started. My title was: Pierre Bourdieu. Les paradoxes de la réflexivité. It was my line for investigation. My editor was Bruno Auerbach, who has published all of Bourdieu’s posthumous lectures and books at Le Seuil, a great expert. He is an outstanding editor, and he guaranteed that I would not make any mistake on Bourdieu. My harsh critics do not know that. Very often, they make huge errors, ignoring his scrupulous checking work. He did not like my title. In my text, there was a “heroic structuralism” somewhere. One evening he called me. I remember, I was in Budapest. “I found the right title”, he said. It was a good one. Bourdieu envisaged himself as a sociological hero who made a conceptual revolution, the same as the symbolic one done by Manet in painting. My book is not anti-Bourdieuian. I have used Bourdieu against Bourdieu at times, and I acknowledge that you may find in his last masterpiece, Pascalian Meditations, many insights about the limitations of his structuralism. But they are merely a glimpse. I do not plan to write again on Bourdieu. I hope that you are now convinced that my admiration is intact, but that it is a permanent duty to submit critical thinking to critique.

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