Bourdieu has produced a conceptual system whose relationship with Marx’s is enigmatic. It involves a similar terminology: capital, reproduction, classes, and so on. In often analogous terms, it analyses modern forms of domination, providing a critique of them that is emancipatory in intent. It thus displays a theoretico-political ambition which recalls that of a ‘theory of praxis’. However, it realises it in a body of competing axioms – those of a ‘general theory of practice’. So how are these two conceptual universes related to one another?

I shall not seek an answer to this question in Bourdieu’s references to Marxism, which remain internal to his own problematic, but in a comparison between it and Marx’s problematic. I shall advance the following thesis: Bourdieu takes over the ‘generalist’ ambition of Marxism, but in terms of a ‘sociology’ – a theory of social relations – not those of a ‘historical materialism’, whose distinctive feature is that it takes the complex of the relations between social relations and productive forces as its object. In this sense, it involves a regional programme as opposed to a general one, which neither possesses the same ambitions, nor contains the same risks, as the Marxist programme, and which cannot prompt either the same kind of examination or the same expectations.
The general programme has everything to learn from regional knowledge. And ‘Marxism’, in this sense, lives on ‘sociology’. However, here I shall leave to one side Bourdieu’s most valuable contributions – particularly his ‘theory of the production of symbolic goods’. If it is legitimate to focus on the project’s ‘limits’, on what it cannot offer, it is because it presents itself as a ‘general’ project – that is to say, as taking up a challenge in the face of which Marxism has supposedly proved deficient. I would like to show why things are not so simple. On the other hand, I also want make it clear that Bourdieu’s work offers some remarkable contributions to the programme outlined by Marx and, specifically, to a materialist theory of modern society: not only various ‘additions’ to Marxism, but some crucial indications for its critique and revision.

I shall therefore examine how Bourdieu retranslates a number of Marx’s concepts into a different space, whose specific properties I shall study. Ultimately, my standpoint is not that of a supposedly standard Marxism, but of the ‘meta/structural’ problematic, inscribed in a ‘historical materialism’, proposed in Théorie générale.

Bourdieu does not thematise ‘capital’ as a process in the manner of Marx: he understands it primarily as a differential endowment. In Bourdieu, the terminology of ‘capital’ and its ‘reproduction’, construed as a class relationship, clearly articulates a claim to impart a new meaning to the words. To Marxism, which allegedly offers a picture of modern society, its dynamics and contradictions, based exclusively on the concept of ‘economic capital’, Bourdieu counter-poses the existence of another factor, which he assigns the same epistemological status in this respect: ‘cultural capital’. He thus proposes a map of ‘the space of social classes’ on the basis of these two components. On the ordinate, according to the volume of capital, we find the dominant above and the dominated below. On the abscissa, according to the type of capital, we have economic capital on the one hand and cultural capital on the other. A population – broken down according to profession (that is, by its link to the ‘relations of production’),

to which a certain level of income and education is attached, as well as various overdeterminations such as sex, age, ethnicity, region, religion, and so on – is thus distributed in a ‘space of class conditions’, on the basis of which struggles between classes and class fractions can be understood.

1 See Bourdieu 1984, pp. 106–7.