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‘DS View’, an academic activity in which students, researchers and faculty are encouraged to write short academic essays on the Development discourse, aims to generate discussion on issues concurrent to the times we are living in. The topical range may include academic debates on issues such as poverty, inequality, gender, conflict and human security. The essay for DS View can be expository, argumentative, persuasive or analytical.

The topic of ninth DS View is ‘**Bourdieu and Social Capital**’ authored by Kashif.

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Bourdieu and Social Capital

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The world is geared for accumulation: of power, wealth, resources and culture. For us to understand the structures of the present world, a diachronic approach is necessary. Accumulation takes place over time, merging the various forms of capital to produce the world as can be seen and deciphered at any one instant. To approach it synchronically would be a mistake, as it would ignore the time consuming processes of accumulation and reduce the world under analysis to a ‘discontinuous series of instantaneous mechanical equilibria between agents who are treated as interchangeable particles’ (Bourdieu, 1986).

This mechanical reduction of social phenomenon is exactly what the post-structuralists were trying to avoid. Instead, they seek to understand the nature of the forces that shape, control and change the world. Coming from a Marxist perspective, Bourdieu perceives capital to be one the primary forces that affect an individual as a member of the society. He goes on to define capital as accumulated labour. This value of labour, when acquired by an individual allows them ‘to appropriate social energy’ (Bourdieu, 1986). Social energy can be understood as the capability of a person to perform functions within a social framework.

Capital can be understood both as a force ‘inscribed in objective or subjective structures’ or as a working principle ‘underlying the immanent regularities of the social world’. Through the workings of capital the various stratifications in the world come into being as no one possesses capital equally, thus varying the potential capacity to realise ideas. Bourdieu says capital ‘is a force inscribed in the objectivity of things so that everything is not equally possible or impossible’.

Apart from economic capital, which is the focus of interest in the modern world, leading to the ‘disinterestedness’ of other forms, there exists according to Bourdieu two other forms of capital, namely Cultural and Social. These two have been largely ignored in the past but he makes a convincing case for their importance in the social world, especially in the field of education. Even here, we see that there exists certain binary oppositions, whereby economic capital in the form of profits and maximum gains run in opposition to the fields of pure art and philosophy, which exist solely to produce cultural capital. Yet these oppositions are not absolutely removed from each other, there exists possibilities of ‘transubstantiation’ whereby one form of capital can be converted into another. As an example we can study how parents convert substantial amounts of money, economic capital, into cultural capital in the form of education for the child throughout his childhood.

Cultural capital works most prominently in the domestic education of the child, with the parents spending time and labour on investing the child with cultural capital, specifically in its embodied form, defined as ‘long lasting dispositions of the mind and body’. It is argued that the division of cultural capital between classes and class fractions is not equal, hence giving rise to the inequalities faced by children in academic opportunities, which pertains to the institutionalised form of cultural capital. Even talent and ability can be considered to be products of this earliest investment of cultural capital. This acquisition of culture falls into the category of capital as it requires first hand labour, in the form of inculcation and assimilation of knowledge which takes a considerable amount of time and cannot occur instantaneously. This cost of personal effort can be measured most precisely by the length of time it takes to acquire the capital. Cultural capital can be acquired throughout one’s life but ‘it always remains marked by its earliest conditions of acquisition’ which leave its imprint on the character and personality of the bearer of the capital.

Social capital is defined by Bourdieu as ‘the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalised relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition...which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectively

owned capital, a “credential” which entitles them to credit, in the various senses of the word.’ According to another definition ‘social capital is the resource available to actors as a function of their location in the structure of their social relations’ (Adler, 2002).

These definitions highlight the importance of a person’s placement within a system, labelling it as a valuable resource and hence as capital. His locatedness within a network at any given moment will determine the availability of resources open to him and hence control or at least partially determine the paths of action that an individual can take.

Furthermore, there is a direct connection between social capital and the size of the network, in a way, as a member of the group, the individual has a share in the collective capital possessed by that group. ‘The volume of social capital possessed by a given agent thus depends on the size of the network of connections he can effectively mobilise and on the volume of the capital possessed in his own right by each of those to whom he is connected’ (Bourdieu, 1986).

Social capital thus influences the formation of groups and organisations, acting as a principle of affiliation as it were, bringing people with shared interests together to work as a unit, increasing an individual’s efficacy in the social world and thereby increasing the productivity of the group as a whole.

Social capital enables a system of exchange which enables conversion from other forms of capital into social capital and conversion of social capital to economic capital. ‘Exchange transforms the things exchanged into signs of recognition and, through the mutual recognition of group membership which it implies, reproduces the group.’ From this it can be understood that it is not a static, unchanging system of exchange, but a rather dynamic process which involves shifting agents and agencies all working towards similar goals, namely that of maximising profit. Neither is this system a completely open system, whose membership is restricted both through economic and cultural capital, and the acquisition of which can help in furthering the appropriation of social capital as well.

One can glimpse in this explanation, situated firmly in the modern times subject to ‘universal reducibility to economics’, are-emergence of the ancient ideas of reciprocity. A primitive system has lasted, in the form of social capital, to enable social mobility and give value to ‘labour-time’ invested by an individual in the social system. This social reciprocity can then be converted into economic and cultural capital according to the needs of the agent, just as reciprocity worked in primitive societies to fulfil the needs of an individual in the absence of advanced economic systems of trade and exchange.

As a result, we can perceive in a localised Pakistani context more emphasis given to social capital than to other forms. This allows a loose analysis in terms of the survival of reciprocal systems which prevailed in the traditional cultural setup, in favour of purely economic capital which originates outside, and is alien to the primitive oriental mind. Thus we can see in our system the prime importance of ‘*sifarish*’ which is merely the cultural embodiment of social capital. It forms, in Bourdieu’s words ‘a continuous series of exchanges in which recognition is endlessly affirmed and reaffirmed’.

References

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