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TITLE: A Negative Sociology of the State: Thinking the State with Pierre Bourdieu

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PAGES: 659-674

ORIGINAL PDF URL: <https://dergipark.org.tr/tr/download/article-file/3132524>

A Negative Sociology of the State: Thinking the State with Pierre Bourdieu¹

Bir Negatif Devlet Sosyolojisi: Pierre Bourdieu ile Devleti Düşünmek

Gürhan ÖZPOLAT^a 

Abstract

This article explores Pierre Bourdieu's theory on the state's pivotal role in producing and perpetuating social order, symbolic power, and domination. Bourdieu challenges the traditional view of the state as a monolithic entity and emphasizes its function as a generator of symbolic capital. According to Bourdieu, the state is the central bank of symbolic capital, confers privileges and authorizations upon social actors, thereby cements its position as the monopoly of legitimate symbolic violence. He contends that the state operates within a universe of belief, much like a sorcerer, and its power lies in its capacity to make itself invisible while maintaining social order. By examining the state as a meta-field, Bourdieu challenges conventional state theories, uncovering the underlying power dynamics and interests within the bureaucratic sphere. In conclusion, Bourdieu's multifaceted perspective on the state provides a robust framework for understanding the intricate interplay of symbolic power, domination, and social order. This article highlights the importance of critically analysing the state's role in shaping collective beliefs and underscores the necessity of comprehensively understanding state power, encompassing both its symbolic and material dimensions.

Keywords

bureaucratic field, genetic sociology, negative sociology, symbolic capital, symbolic power

Öz

Bu makale Pierre Bourdieu'nün devletin toplumsal düzen, simgesel iktidar ve tahakkümün üretilmesi ve sürdürülmesindeki önemli rolüne ilişkin teorisini incelemektedir. Bourdieu, devletin monolitik bir varlık olduğu yönündeki geleneksel görüşe karşı çıkmakta ve simgesel sermaye üreticisi olarak işlevini vurgulamaktadır. Bourdieu'ye göre devlet, simgesel sermayenin merkez bankasıdır, toplumsal aktörlere ayrıcalıklar ve yetkiler verir, böylece meşru simgesel şiddet tekeli olarak konumunu sağlamlaştırır. Devletin, tıpkı bir büyücü gibi, bir inanç evreni içinde faaliyet gösterdiğini ve gücünün, toplumsal düzeni sağlarken kendini görünmez kılma kapasitesinde yattığını iddia eder. Devleti bir meta alan olarak inceleyen Bourdieu, geleneksel devlet teorilerine meydan okuyarak bürokratik alanın altında yatan güç dinamiklerini ve çıkarları ortaya çıkarır. Sonuç olarak, Bourdieu'nün devlete ilişkin çok yönlü perspektifi, simgesel iktidar, tahakküm ve toplumsal düzenin karmaşık etkileşimini anlamak için sağlam bir çerçeve sunmaktadır. Bu makale, devletin kolektif inançları şekillendirmedeki rolünü eleştirel bir şekilde analiz etmenin önemini vurgulamakta ve devlet iktidarını hem simgesel hem de maddi boyutlarını kapsayacak şekilde kapsamlı bir şekilde anlamının gerekliliğinin altını çizmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler

Bürokratik alan, genetik sosyoloji, negatif sosyoloji, simgesel sermaye, simgesel iktidar

¹ This paper is based on the theoretical chapter of my doctoral study, which was written under the supervision of Associate Professor İbrahim Arap.

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1. Introduction¹

Pierre Bourdieu, who had remained relatively silent about the state as the “inevitable object of sociology” (Berkkurt, 2012) until his last works, published a short article in 1977 that can be considered a turning point in his thought and work. In this article, Bourdieu argues that language is not simply a neutral tool for representing reality but rather a social practice that produces and reproduces power relations. This article indicates a critical development in his attempt to construct a kind of sociology of symbolic forms and domination. In addition to being an attempt to construct a non-class reductionist model of the production of ideology (Loyal, 2017, p. 33), it can also be seen as a precursor to Bourdieu’s later work on the state and symbolic power, as it lays the groundwork for his theory of symbolic domination and the role of language in reproducing social inequalities. The article is a combined presentation of the ideas of Edward Sapir and Lee Whorf, who can be considered a continuum of the philosophical tradition of Kant-Humboldt-Cassirer. They saw language as a knowledge tool for constructing the objective world but ignored its social functions. The article also incorporates the approaches of structuralists, who viewed language as a means of communication but emphasized its structured nature:

“Symbols are the instruments par excellence of ‘social integration’: as instruments of knowledge and communication, they make possible the consensus on the meaning of the social world that fundamentally contributes to the reproduction of the social order; ‘logical’ integration is the condition for ‘moral’ integration” (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 408).

Synthesizing two quite different traditions dealing with language as a symbolic system, Bourdieu draws attention to the ability of symbolic power to construct social reality and to establish the direct meaning that individuals have regarding the social world through a gnoseological order. According to Bourdieu, symbolic capital, and thus symbolic power, is the power of creating a vision and hence a division that validates or transforms the social world itself, determining how social actors will perceive the social world (Loyal, 2017, pp. 33–34).

From this perspective, Bourdieu’s theory of the state, which he presented in his lectures on the state at the *Collège de France* between 1989 and 1992, can be seen as a continuation of his project to synthesize neo-Kantian and structuralist social ontologies that he initiated in his article on symbolic power. For Bourdieu, following Durkheim, the state, like all other symbolic systems (science, language, religion, myth, art, etc.), is a phenomenon that lies at “the foundation of both the logical and the moral conformity of the social world” (Bourdieu, 2014: 4). The sphere where the influence of the state is particularly felt is, above all, the field of symbolic production (Bourdieu, 1994, p. 2).² The state is an excellent tool for establishing a

¹ On January 23 in 2012, an international workshop hosted by the *Collège de France* brought together a large number of historians, sociologists, anthropologists, and political scientists to discuss the ideas put forward by Bourdieu in his lectures on the state. For the video recordings of the workshop entitled “Penser l’Etat avec Pierre Bourdieu,” visit, <https://anthropohira.wordpress.com/2017/09/04/journee-detude-internationale-penser-letat-avec-pierre-bourdieu-1/> (05.01.2023). For the publication of some of the papers presented at the workshop in an article format, see also *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, (Raisons d’État) Vol: 201-202, No: 1-2, Le Seuil, Paris, 2014.

² Bourdieu draws on the sociological theories developed by Marx, Durkheim, and Weber to explain the structure and functions of the state. He synthesizes their approaches to present an explanatory model. While Marx questions the functions of the state, Bourdieu believes that Marxist state theory only partially answers the question because it does not adequately relate these functions to the fundamental characteristics of the state, such as its functioning and the concrete conditions in which it operates.

kind of public order in terms of symbolic unconscious forms, beyond the visible physical forms. The production and canonization of social categories and classifications emerge as one of the fundamental functions of the state (Bourdieu, 2014, p. 9).

2. The State as the Point of View Overlooking All Points of View

The functioning of symbolic forms and symbolic power in the reproduction of the social order allows for the domination of one social view over others or their imposition through struggles for hegemony among dominant social groups. Systems of naming, categorization, and signification play a vital role in maintaining social relations of domination by masking their arbitrariness. Drawing on Durkheim's distinction between "logical conformity" and "moral conformity" as well as Cassirer's contribution to the theory of symbolic forms as "structuring structures", Bourdieu sees the state as the creator of meaning and consensus of the social world. According to him, the state represents the "hidden principle of orthodoxy" manifested in public and social order (Loyal, 2017, p. 69). In other words, the state is the producer of the principles of social order, i.e., the symbolic forms of the entire social world, and especially the "structuring structures" applicable to social issues, like Leibniz's god, "a geometrical of all perspectives" (Bourdieu, 2014, p. 67). The state claims to geometrically encompass all points of view, which is an act of deification. To be fully successful in this endeavour, the state must convince everyone that it is the point of view that is not a point of view (Bourdieu, 2014, p. 28).

The state certifies, ritualizes, and registers the actions of individuals and contributes to making its institutionalized "principles of vision and division" appear as if they were natural. In light of this, the state can be seen as a unique legitimizing agent that mobilizes collective belief capital (Bourdieu, 2014, p. 145):

"The state is this well-founded illusion, this place that exists essentially because people believe that it exists. This illusory reality, collectively validated by consensus, is the site that you are headed towards when you go back from a certain number of phenomena — educational qualifications, professional qualifications or calendar. Proceeding step by step, you arrive at a site that is the foundation of all this. This mysterious reality exists through its effects and through the collective belief in its existence, which lies at the origin of these effects. It is something that you cannot lay your hands on, or tackle in the way that people from the Marxist tradition do when they say 'the state does this', 'the state does that'. I could cite you kilometres of texts with the word state as the subject of actions and proposals. That is a very dangerous fiction, which prevents us from properly understanding the state. By way of preamble, therefore, what I want to say is: be careful, all sentences that have the state as subject are theological sentences —which does not mean that they are false, inasmuch as the state is a theological entity, that is, an entity that exists by way of belief" (Bourdieu, 2014, p. 10).

Therefore, Bourdieu distances himself from the Marxist approach to the state and shifts his focus from the functions of the state to the effectiveness of domination based on collective consent. Durkheim's work provides the elements that enable Bourdieu to understand the foundations of the symbolic power of the state. For example, Bourdieu borrows the concept of "logical conformism" from Durkheim, which constitutes the basis of the social integration that the state contributes to producing. In this context, the logical conformism produced by the state appears as a precondition for the violence and domination exercised by the state through its appropriators (Lenoir, 2012, pp. 137–138).

For Bourdieu, the question of the state is at least as complex as the question of being (*Dasein*), since thinking about it requires a great deal of effort (Bourdieu, 2014, p. 30). According to him, any endeavour that attempts to think about the state is inevitably vulnerable to the danger of resorting to the categories of classification and thought produced by the state:

“To endeavor to think the state is to take the risk of taking over (or being taken over by) a thought of the state, that is, of applying to the state categories of thought produced and guaranteed by the state and hence to misrecognize its most profound truth. This proposition, which may seem both abstract and pre-emptory, will be more readily accepted if, at the close of the argument, one agrees to return to this point of departure, but armed this time with the knowledge that one of the major powers of the state is to produce and impose (especially through the school system) categories of thought that we spontaneously apply to all things of the social world—including the state itself” (Bourdieu, 1994, p. 1).

In other words, since everyone who thinks about the state has been running the risk of attributing some kind of “state thought” to the state, the state is a very difficult object for social scientists to work on:³

“The state has been a great protector of ignorance, in the sense that it can serve as repository for everything that people are unable to explain in the social world, and it has been endowed with every possible function: the state maintains, etc. You will see, in books with a ‘theoretical’ pretension, that a fantastic number of sentences have the state as subject. This kind of hypostatizing of the word ‘state’ is everyday theology” (Bourdieu, 2014, p. 96).

He argues that the difficulty of studying the state is partly due to the fact that this object is “almost unthinkable”. According to him, the limits that enable the state to take root in our deepest thoughts and render itself “unthinkable” are based on unconscious interactions between “objective structures” and “mental structures” that can only function with the complicity of its “victims” who try to think about it (Bourdieu, 2014, p. 151). In other words, the state has become such a naturalized aspect of our social world that we hardly question its existence or the power it wields. Its structures and processes have become so entrenched in our mental and social frameworks that they operate without our conscious awareness. The state’s power is thus reinforced by the collective investment of individuals in the belief that the state is a necessary and legitimate entity that plays a vital role in maintaining social order. Bourdieu’s theory of the state, therefore, highlights the importance of critically examining the taken-for-granted assumptions and beliefs that underpin the functioning of the state and its power relations.

Contrary to what is generally believed, the state cannot be conceived as a monolithic, abstract, and independent entity that merely produces legitimizing discourses or performs other kinds of concrete actions, and protects the interests of the ruling class (Bourdieu, 1998a, pp. 33–34). It operates through the ordinary everyday actions of social agents, but also in a deeper way (Loyal, 2017, pp. 72–73). Official matters mean something to us directly, and we understand

³ Bourdieu, in his seminar on the state at the *Collège de France* on January 31 in 1991, confessed that he was also a victim of the idea of the state: “After having worked a lot on the state, re-reading today my article ‘On symbolic power’ makes me see the extent to which I was myself a victim of state thought. I was not aware that I was writing an article on the state; I thought I was writing an article on symbolic power. I see this now as evidence of the extraordinary power of the state and state thought” (Bourdieu, 2014, p. 161).

them without having to think about them. For example, we have no difficulty figuring out how to fill out a bureaucratic form. In other words, the idea of the state accompanies us in every seemingly trivial and ordinary moment of our daily lives, from filling out a bureaucratic form to having an identity card, from signing a birth or death certificate to a clean bill of health, and more. The way we perceive and evaluate all kinds of social processes is a direct or indirect effect of the ideas and categories of the state. The reason why it is easy and common to make generalizations about this object is that, when it comes to the state, we already have an idea of what we should study:

“We possess a knowledge of the state, and every thinker who has conceived the state before me has appropriated the state with a thought that the state has imposed on him, an appropriation that is only so easy, so self-evident, so immediate, because it is alienated. It is a comprehension that does not comprehend itself, that does not comprehend the social conditions of its own possibility. We have in fact an immediate mastery of state things. [...] That is why the work of the sociologist, in this particular case, consists in trying to reappropriate those categories of state thought that the state has produced and inculcated in each one of us, that were produced at the same time as the state was produced, and that we apply to everything, particularly to the state in order to conceive the state, with the result that the state remains the unthought, the unthought principle of the greater part of our thoughts, including those on the state” (Bourdieu, 2014, pp. 107–108).

For Bourdieu, who is well aware that it is never entirely possible to eliminate the “false self-evident beliefs” of the social, the state is one of the most powerful sources of creating these beliefs (Bourdieu, 2014, p. 366):

“The construction of the state is accompanied by the construction of a sort of common historical transcendental, immanent to all its ‘subjects’. Through the framing it imposes upon practices, the state establishes and inculcates common forms and categories of perception and appreciation, social frameworks of perceptions, of understanding or of memory, in short state forms of classification. It thereby creates the conditions for a kind of immediate orchestration of habituses which is itself the foundation of a consensus over this set of shared evidences constitutive of (national) common sense” (Bourdieu, 1994, p. 13).

For this reason, to be able to think about the state, all the presuppositions that exist in the structures of consciousness that we have built in the social world, that is, in the minds of those who analyse the state themselves, must be opened to questioning:

“In order to avoid thinking the state with state thinking, the sociologist has to avoid thinking about society with a thought produced by society. [...] In the case of the state, this antinomy of research in social science, and perhaps of research in general, is particularly felt, an antinomy arising from the fact that if you know nothing then you see nothing, and if you do know, you risk seeing only what you know” (Bourdieu, 2014, pp. 106–107).

According to Bourdieu, the particular difficulty with the issue of the state is that almost all thinkers who have attempted to think about the state have, to a greater or lesser extent, directly or indirectly, contributed to the formation of the state and its embodiment (Bourdieu, 1994, pp. 2–3).⁴ For this reason, he considers it extremely important to separate ourselves from popular ideas about the state and to distance ourselves from grand theories:

⁴ See also (Bourdieu et al., 2000).

“To speak of the state with great emphasis, with a philosophical resonance, may confer a certain form of success, but I believe it is not a good strategy, as these problems are too difficult. My own strategy is always to catch hold of these ‘big problems’ by an accessible side, where they reveal the essential thing that is hidden beneath insignificant appearances” (Bourdieu, 2014, p. 86).

When it comes to the state, the more we understand, the less we understand. For Bourdieu, the simpler the appearance, the more complex it is. One of the fundamental principles of Bourdieu’s sociology is that “it consists in never taking a problem at face value, but seeing that problems are a problem, and so there is a historic genesis of problems” (Bourdieu, 2014, p. 26). It is with this attitude, which he calls “negative sociology,” that he approaches the state. In other words, instead of synthesizing classical theories of the state as is customary, he argues for the importance of a negative sociology of the state that challenges common and dominant ideas about the state’s agents, boundaries, functions, and acts (Arnholtz & Hammerslev, 2013, p. 45). According to him, when thinking about the state, to have even a small chance, we have to adopt the most sceptical attitude that can be taken toward the state, that is, we must maintain epistemological caution against presuppositions, common beliefs, and spontaneous sociology (Bourdieu, 2014, pp. 3, 106–107).

3. The State as the Central Bank of Symbolic Capital

Bourdieu is one of the few sociologists who emphasize the role of symbolic forms and processes in the production and reproduction of social inequalities. He argues that even in highly differentiated societies, the dominant form of domination takes the form of symbolic violence rather than overt coercion or threats of physical violence. He also focuses on the role of cultural processes, producers, and institutions that contribute to the perpetuation of inequalities in contemporary societies. Symbolic violence, an insidious form of violence from which all appearances, allusions, seductions, threats, orders, and calls for order derive their “hypnotic power”, is practiced through recognition and misrecognition below the level of consciousness and desire. This form of domination, which can only operate through the interaction of dispositions (*habitus*), is contingent on the continuity and/or transformation of the structures that produce these dispositions, which inevitably leads us to the issue of symbolic domination, the hallmark of Bourdieu’s sociology (Bourdieu, 2001, p. 42).

Bourdieu’s thoughts on the state cannot be understood without taking into account his thoughts on symbolic capital, symbolic violence, and symbolic power. According to Bourdieu, the state is the most important source of symbolic power and can bestow this form of capital, which is distinguished by containing its own justification, at will (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 172). In other words, the state is the source of symbolic credit that determines who the social agents are, their public qualities, and who they should be, and grants them certain privileges and authorizations within these limits through acts of affirmation and consecration, such as diplomas, identity cards, certificates, etc. Therefore, according to Bourdieu, the state, which conducts these acts of official attestation and consecration and the agents who perform them through its legitimate representatives, is the “central bank of symbolic capital” in addition to all the other functions it fulfils (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1993, pp. 39–40):

“What I want to try to show is how a great fetish like the state was constituted, or, to use a metaphor that I shall go on to explain, this ‘central bank of symbolic capital’, this kind of site where all the fiduciary currency circulating in the social world is produced and guaranteed,

as well as all the realities we can designate as fetishes, whether an educational qualification, a legitimate culture, the nation, the notion of state border, or spelling. The question for me is to study the creation of this creator and guarantor of fetishes, for which a whole nation, or a section of it, is prepared to die. I think we must always bear in mind the fact that the state is a symbolic power that can obtain what is called the supreme sacrifice over things that may be as derisory as spelling, or seem more serious, such as borders. [...] It is this tradition of thought that we must enter in order to understand the state. I am convinced that genetic analysis is one of the only ways of breaking with the illusion inherent to specifically synchronic perception, that is, breaking with the doxic adhesion resulting from the fact that the state and all its creations —language, law, spelling, etc.— are inscribed both in reality and in people's minds; as well as all the effects that can be called psychological, and that I prefer to call symbolic so as to be more rigorous, all the effects that lead us to think the state with a state thought” (Bourdieu, 2014, pp. 122–123).

Bourdieu even goes one step further and reformulates Weber's famous formula (Weber, 1978, p. 54), arguing that the state has not only the monopoly of legitimate physical violence but also the monopoly of legitimate symbolic violence:

“If I had to give a provisional definition of what is called ‘the state’, I would say that the sector of the field of power, which may be called ‘administrative field’ or ‘field of public office’, this sector that we particularly have in mind when we speak of ‘state’ without further precision, is defined by possession of the monopoly of legitimate physical and symbolic violence. Already several years ago, I made an addition to the famous definition of Max Weber, who defined the state [as the] ‘monopoly of legitimate violence’, which I corrected by adding ‘monopoly of legitimate physical and symbolic violence’, in as much as the monopoly of symbolic violence is the condition for possession of the exercise of the monopoly of physical violence itself” (Bourdieu, 2014, pp. 3–4).

“[T]he state is an X (to be determined) which successfully claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical and symbolic violence over a definite territory and over the totality of the corresponding population. If the state is able to exert symbolic violence, it is because it incarnates itself simultaneously in objectivity, in the form of specific organizational structures and mechanisms, and in subjectivity in the form of mental structures and categories of perception and thought. By realizing itself in social structures and in the mental structures adapted to them, the instituted institution makes us forget that it issues out of a long series of acts of institution (in the active sense) and hence has all the appearances of the natural” (Bourdieu, 1994, pp. 3–4).

Three points are particularly important here: First, as the holder of the monopoly of legitimate symbolic violence, the state, by its mere existence, limits the symbolic power struggles for this monopoly, that is, the struggles of social agents for symbolic power, to impose their “principles of vision and di-vision” on other agents.⁵ In this way, it also eliminates certain principles of “distinction” and “division” in the struggles of everyone against everyone, which makes the state itself one of the main interests (state capital) in the struggles for symbolic power (Bourdieu, 2000, pp. 186–187). Second, according to Bourdieu, all forms of physical violence inevitably contain symbolic elements (Bourdieu, 2014, p. 191). The material-physical aspect of violence and the immaterial-symbolic aspects are inextricably linked, so much so that Bourdieu argues that in Weber's classical definition, the former (monopoly of physical violence) implicitly includes the latter (monopoly of symbolic violence) (Bourdieu, 2014, p. 4). More precisely, he

⁵ For an opposing view, see (Addi, 2001).

concludes by using the Weberian model, which Weber duly applied in the sociology of religion (see Weber, 1965, pp. 46–59) but not in his analyses of the state, against Weber himself (Bourdieu, 2014, p. 185). Third, both processes of violence become meaningful only if they are recognised by a community of agents with certain dispositions (*habitus*). In other words, according to Bourdieu, “physicalist” approaches fail to explain how the social order is formed and why the governed so easily submit to the sovereignty of the state (Loyal, 2017, pp. 68–69).

However, although Bourdieu defines the state as an organization with a monopoly over legitimate means of physical and symbolic violence, his analysis focuses more on the symbolic dimensions of this monopoly of violence, never giving priority to the former. Contrary to the classical materialist tradition, he thinks that primitive capital accumulation is not economic or military capital but symbolic capital accumulation.⁶ Unlike “physicalist” approaches that largely associate sovereignty with material or military forces, including the army or the police, Bourdieu, drawing on Weber’s writings on domination and legitimacy, argues that no power can be understood as pure power alone (Loyal, 2017, p. 51). For Bourdieu, the fundamental questions revolve around the role of the state in the maintenance of social order and authority, that is, in the production of social consent, an issue raised not only by Weber but also by philosophers such as Pascal, Spinoza, and Hume.

Therefore, “physical violence” in the sense mentioned by Elias or “economic coercion” through taxation mentioned by Tilly are secondary elements for him. He believes that it is impossible to understand any power relations without revealing their symbolic dimensions. In this context, his primary goal is to create a materialist theory that does not exclude symbolic elements. According to him, if power consisted only of physical, military, and even economic forms, it would probably be much more fragile and easily destructible.⁷ In other words, “physicalist” perspectives forget the fact that forms of government based only on physical violence can be easily overthrown (Bourdieu, 2014, p. 163). This point occupies a central position in his thought. This is the reason why he tries to understand how symbolic capital, symbolic violence and symbolic power, that is, this “magical power” that makes itself invisible enough to make you forget its existence, works. And according to him, the state, as an institution that produces widespread “belief” and “obedience”, has a remarkable “magical power” in the true sense of the word. In other words, the state is a kind of *deus absconditus*, i.e., the hidden god (Bourdieu, 2014, p. 7). Without resorting to the constant threat of physical violence, it manages to establish an orderly and predictable social world at the lowest possible social cost (Bourdieu, 2014, p. 166).

In addition to all these, Bourdieu argues that the state should be analysed with a logic similar to Marcel Mauss’ analysis of magic and sorcery. According to him, the state is on the side of magic, just like the sorcerer (Bourdieu, 2014, p. 12). However, both thinkers use the concept of magic in a sense quite different from the first meaning that comes to mind. Unlike his predecessors, who treated magic as a psychological phenomenon, Mauss argues that magic is a social invention, a product of common social activities. He tries to create a general theory

⁶ For an article discussing the role of symbolic capital in the formation of the modern state, and how the state accumulates symbolic capital, see (Loveman, 2005).

⁷ Additionally, see the study that interprets Bourdieu’s anthropology of the state as a form of political theology based on a “panentheistic conception of the state” that transcends social reality but also permeates all social issues (Shammas, 2019).

of magic based on the methodological principles put forward by Durkheim. Bourdieu, on the other hand, refers to the phenomenon of social magic to emphasize the productive power of institutional acts, what he calls symbolic power. He uses this concept to explain the situation in which identities are assigned to agents through institutional ceremonies/rituals and, with these new identities, the agents gain social privileges that they would not otherwise have.⁸

Acts of “certification” and “attestation”, in which an official authority acts as the representative of the state to certify the state of things at a certain moment, can be examples in this context. Such acts include certifying a document, granting custody of a child to someone, and changing marital status. These official acts, which obey the logic of magic mentioned by Bourdieu, change social reality, so to speak, in terms of form. Interestingly, although these acts seem to change nothing in a way, they change everything. In particular, it changes the collective meaning attributed to the social value of the remarked act, which is accepted by almost everyone with very real consequences (the right to an inheritance, dependents’ allowances, disability pensions, sick leave, etc.) (Bourdieu, 1996, p. 376). Therefore, according to Bourdieu, the state, in this respect, is just like Mauss’ sorcerer:

“Just as the sorcerer mobilizes the capital of belief accumulated by the functioning of the magical universe, the President of the Republic who signs a decree of nomination or the physician who signs a certificate (of illness, invalidity, etc.) mobilizes a symbolic capital accumulated in and through the whole network of relations of recognition constitutive of the bureaucratic universe. Who certifies the validity of the certificate? It is the one who signs the credential giving license to certify. But who then certifies this? We are carried through an infinite regression at the end of which ‘one has to stop’ and where one could, following medieval theologians, choose to give the name of ‘state’ to the last (or to the first) link in the long chain of official acts of consecration” (Bourdieu, 1994, pp. 11–12).

It may come as a surprise that Bourdieu attempts to analyse the state from Mauss’ work on magic, rather than from the conventional points of departure of traditional sociological studies of the state. This conscious choice is to emphasise the notion of symbolic violence; one of Bourdieu’s fundamental concepts, and to show that the state is not necessarily where we look for it.⁹ Just like what gives the sorcerer his magical power, the existence of other sorcerers, magical tools, and a universe of beliefs that contribute to the sorcerer’s existence, what gives the state its power is that it takes place within a similar universe of beliefs. The state even

⁸ As İřtar Gözaydın (2014, p. 391) rightly points out, Bourdieu’s approach to magic in *The Logic of Sense* is influenced by Mauss. However, his approach in his later works is closer to Weber than Mauss, who does not separate magic from the series of actions for everyday purposes and categories it as a relatively rational action, since the results of magical actions are commonly aimed at achieving economic benefit. According to Weber, the magician is a “professional” who possesses certain “extraordinary powers” — which Weber defines as “charisma” — that enable him to control natural phenomena and forces. He benefits certain people by doing good or evil to them. Unlike ordinary people who do not belong to the “magic universe”, in Weber’s words, “layman”, the charisma of the magician is permanent. Moreover, he has transformed the distinctive subjective state represented or mediated by charisma, namely ecstasy, into a permanent occupation (see Weber, 1965, pp. 3–5).

⁹ As Philip Abrams (1988, p. 82) puts it, “[t]he task of the sociologist is to demystify; and in this context that means attending to the senses in which the state does not exist rather than to those in which it does”. Bourdieu shares a similar mission for sociology and the sociologist, even if he believes it is epistemologically flawed that researchers who aim to demystify often assume that social agents always act as if their trajectories have an absolute goal, an ultimate destination (cf. Bourdieu, 1998b, p. 82). For Bourdieu’s operation of demystification through “the alchemy of representation,” see also (Bourdieu, 2004).

directly contributes to the establishment of this universe at every moment (Bourdieu, 2014, pp. 297–298). In short, for Bourdieu, what needs to be done to understand this “magical power” of the state is to question the mental structures that operate beyond the level of consciousness and the role of the state itself in the production of these structures as a meta-space that holds the monopoly of legitimate symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 2014, p. 165).

4. The State as a Meta-Field

The greatest success of the traditional historical understanding, which accepts all contingencies that may arise and everything that overshadows reality as incidental, is that it confines the historical process between certain constants, that is, it pushes it into the unconscious and obscures historical becoming. This understanding, which Bourdieu calls *doxa*, is a perspective imposed as “universal” and belonging to the rulers. In other words, it is the perspective of those who rule the state because they are sovereign and those who shape their viewpoint as a universal “principle of vision and di-vision” while creating the state. Analysing the state as the basis of these prevailing “principles of vision and di-vision” allows us to understand both the “presumed participation” in the established state order and the exclusively political foundations of this seemingly self-evident participation (Bourdieu, 1994, p. 15). For Bourdieu, the state is the place where the *nomos*, the official and effective principle of the construction of the social world, is most perfectly implemented, as manifested in all acts of affirmation and consecration that confirm, legalise, legitimise and regulate situations. To fully explain the symbolic dimensions of state power, Bourdieu draws on Sapir-Whorf and Mauss, as well as Weber’s contribution to the theory of symbolic systems, which reasserts specialised agents and their private interests through his writings on religion, and constructs a theory of the state as a kind of “meta-field”.

Weber believes that studying the immanent message of religious symbolic forms, as Durkheim did, or of mythological compilations, as Levi-Strauss did, was not sufficient. Instead, he focuses on the producers of “prophetic revelation”, the specific interests that mobilize them, and the strategies they employ in their struggles. He asks questions such as who the producers of symbolic systems (like religion and myth) are, how they are raised and educated, what kind of interests they have, what kind of competition they are in, and what kind of tools they use to perform acts of consecration and ex-communication.

However, while Weber focuses on the producers of these products and their interactions (conflict, competition, compromise, etc.), he pays less attention to the structure of symbolic systems than their functions (Bourdieu, 1994, pp. 15–16). Bourdieu, on the other hand, analyses symbolic systems in the context of their structural features, the social functions they fulfil, and the historical conditions that make their emergence possible.¹⁰ He uses the structuralist method of thought to analyse symbolic systems from a perspective that gives equal importance to both the space of symbolic attitudes and the space of the positions held by the producers of symbolic systems, which he calls the “field”.

Bourdieu argues that a similar approach should be taken when analysing the state:

“To understand the symbolic dimension of the effect of the state, and in particular what we may call the effect of universality it is necessary to understand the specific functioning of

¹⁰ For an example from the religious field, see (Bourdieu, 1991).

the bureaucratic microcosm and thus to analyze the genesis and structure of this universe of agents of the state who have constituted themselves into a state nobility by instituting the state, and in particular, by producing the performative discourse on the state which, under the guise of saying what the state is, caused the state to come into being by stating what it should be—i.e., what should be the position of the producers of this discourse in the division of labor of domination” (Bourdieu, 1994, pp. 16).

“To describe the genesis of the state is to describe the genesis of a social field, a relatively autonomous social microcosm inside the surrounding social world, within which a particular game is played, the game of legitimate politics. [...] To give the genesis of the state is to give the genesis of a field in which politics is played out, symbolized, dramatized in prescribed forms, and by the same token the people with the privilege of entering this game have the privilege of appropriating for themselves a particular resource that we can call the ‘universal’ resource” (Bourdieu, 2014, pp. 98).

Bourdieu argues that his research program, which he calls “genetic sociology”, goes beyond the conventional limits of the discipline of sociology. In this program, he asserts that objective structures and their formation processes should be examined. He believes that the primary goal of this sociology is to analyse the logic of the emergence and functioning of “the high civil service field”, “the bureaucratic field”, or the “state field”.¹¹ In other words, his purpose is to describe the autonomization process of a bureaucratic field as an independent social space in which the reason of state, i.e., a logic relatively independent of morality, religion, and politics, operates both objectively and subjectively.

According to Bourdieu, the state is a space with a logic of its own, such as regulations and restrictions, which generate struggles and very specific interests that are unique to this space. He disagrees with the view in political theory that defines the state as “monolithic”, arguing that the state is neither an “apparatus” as conceptualised by Althusser,¹² nor a “block” as

¹¹ Bourdieu’s interchangeable use of the terms “state field”, “bureaucratic field” and “administrative field” may seem misleading. He notes that dictionaries traditionally distinguish between two closely related meanings of the word “state”: “The state is the administration, a set of ministerial directorates, a form of government. On the other hand, the wider sense: the state is the national territory and the whole of its citizens.” In other words, there is a binary distinction between “the state in the sense of the bureaucratic apparatus that manages collective interests” (State 1) and “the state in the sense of the territory on which the authority of this apparatus is exercised” (State 2). According to him, this distinction is necessary but still artificial. His model of state formation is based on a much simpler formula: “State 1, [...], is made by the making of state 2. [...] In a more rigorous manner, the construction of the state as a relatively autonomous field exerting a power of centralization of physical force and symbolic force, and constituted accordingly as a stake of struggle, is inseparably accompanied by the construction of the unified social space that is its foundation” (Bourdieu, 2014, pp. 31, 123). Therefore, his use of these concepts interchangeably is entirely the result of a conscious choice.

¹² Bourdieu’s objection to Althusser is not limited to the issue of whether the state should be conceived as an apparatus (whether repressive or ideological). Bourdieu is quite distant in every sense from the notion of apparatus, which he characterizes as “the Trojan horse of pessimistic functionalism”. According to him, the notion of the apparatus is like a “hellish” machine designed to reach a certain destination regardless of place, time, or situation. This “conspiracy fantasy”, the idea that an “evil” will is responsible for everything that happens in the social world, often paralyzes critical thinking. The school, the church, the media, the law, political parties, trade unions, etc. are not apparatuses but fields. And in each of them, there are struggles, winners, and losers, i.e., history. In a field, agents and institutions with different powers and therefore different chances of winning the struggle with each other to benefit from certain resources (capital) defined for that field, according to the rules and regulations that constitute that field. Although the dominant agents in the field can organize the functioning of the field in a way to pursue their own interests, they also have to deal with the resistance of the oppressed

formulated by Poulantzas,¹³ but rather, like all other social spaces, it is a space structured according to antagonisms based on different forms of capital and interests. In other words, like all other spaces, the state is a site of struggles for different agents, groups of agents, or institutions to seize positions that allow them to produce the monopoly of legitimate symbolic violence within the field, i.e., the “legitimate gaze”.

We mentioned that Bourdieu uses the terms “state field”, “bureaucratic field” and “administrative field” interchangeably. If we want to maintain the distinction between the state and bureaucracy, we need to understand that bureaucracy is not a unified and monolithic collective entity with its own intentions and will. It is a field of activity that is relatively independent of the economic and social spheres. It is a field in which positions, competencies, and similar factors are clearly defined and codified according to a certain logic, and there are relations between positions associated with relative autonomy. In the bureaucratic field, agents with different social trajectories, interests, capital compositions, and skills compete with each other for the monopoly of intra-field principles of legitimation and division (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 158). This competition determines what is considered a public good and what is not, or which services should be undertaken by the state and which should not. Despite sharing certain

in the field. Additionally, they must take into account the reactions and actions of those who are in a dominant position in the neighbouring or related/associated areas with the field. Because although the field has relative autonomy by definition, it can never exist completely isolated and self-sufficient from other fields. Undoubtedly, to the extent that the rulers succeed in suppressing or destroying the reactions and resistances of the oppressed, i.e., eliminating all other participants, one-way traffic of power in which all actions are applied only from the top down can extend the effects of domination to such an extent that, in such a situation, the struggle and dialectic that constitute the basic dynamic of the field may be disrupted. Bourdieu acknowledges that under these and similar historical conditions, fields can function like apparatuses, but he thinks that “apparatuses as a pathological condition of fields” represent “an attempt to put an end to history”, that is a “borderline”. And according to him, this limit is a limit that cannot be fully reached even in the most repressive regimes (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 102; Bourdieu, 1993, pp. 88–89; Bourdieu, 2013, p. 66; Swartz, 1997, p. 121). For an article that discusses Bourdieu’s engagement with Althusserian Marxism through the issue of the state, see also (Pallotta, 2015).

¹³ Bourdieu’s relation to Poulantzas is much more controversial than that of Althusser, although some authors think that the theme of relative autonomy present in Bourdieu points to Poulantzas. George Steinmetz, for instance, argues that Bourdieu’s theory of relative autonomy is in any case informed by neo-Marxist debates around ENS (Steinmetz, 2014a, p. 113). Jean Batou and Razmig Keucheyan (2014, pp. 22–24), who see the relationship between Bourdieu and Poulantzas as a kind of *rencontre manquée* (missed encounter), similarly argue that Bourdieu points to Poulantzas when he talks about the relative autonomy of the state. Bourdieu mentions Poulantzas three times in his lectures at the *Collège de France* between 1989 and 1992, and as far as we can determine, he does not mention the Greek-born French thinker anywhere else. The first time he mentions Poulantzas in the lectures on the State, he rejects him outright (Bourdieu, 2014, p. 15). On the other two occasions, he presents him as a kind of crypto-American sociologist and explains why he feels closer to Edward Laumann, a pioneer of social network analysis, than to the “Skocpol/Poulantzas line” (Bourdieu, 2014, pp. 109, 111). At this point, following Gisèle Sapiro (2019), we can say that Bourdieu borrowed the concept of relative autonomy from Marxist thought but gave it a completely different meaning by linking it to Weber’s understanding of the differentiation of social spheres because of the emergence of a set of experts (*Wertsphären / Lebensordnungen* - value-spheres / life orders) and Durkheim’s analysis of the social division of labour developed in *De la division du travail social*. However, if we take into account that Bourdieu first used the concept of relative autonomy in a 1965 article in which he also introduced the concept of the field, it becomes clear that he certainly did not borrow this concept from Poulantzas, and at best he may have borrowed it from Althusser. Althusser, who argues that superstructural institutions are relatively autonomous from infrastructural institutions based on Engels’ letters, uses this concept for the first time in his work published in the same year (see Althusser, 2005, p. 111).

concepts and methods, agents do not realize their influence on each other due to field-specific *nomos* (Bourdieu, Christin, & Will, 2000, p. 8). In contrast to other fields of cultural production, the struggles in the bureaucratic sphere are largely aimed at imposing the state's viewpoint on society as a whole or at least on the public:¹⁴

“[T]he bureaucratic field, that is, the space of agents and institutions that have this kind of meta-power, power over all powers: the bureaucratic field is a field that overshadows all fields, a field in which interventions are decreed that may be economic, such as subsidies, or may be juridical, such as the imposition of retirement regulations, etc. The bureaucratic field, as a field in which norms are produced for other fields, is itself a field of struggle, in which can be found traces of all previous struggles. [...] And the agents engaged in this world are in struggle within the state, in which you find all the divisions of society. Struggles about the state, struggles to appropriate the meta-powers held by the state, also take place within the state —here I am trying to describe very complicated things in a very cavalier fashion. The greater part of political struggles involve agents outside the bureaucratic field, but having a relationship of homology with agents involved in the bureaucratic field and in the struggles within it” (Bourdieu, 2014, pp. 367–368).

Different forms of capital accumulation interact with each other to form a unified whole, creating the state as an autonomous social space. The state itself accumulates various types of capital, including a meta-capital that can exercise power over other forms of capital. As a meta-field, the state can regulate the structure and functioning of other fields through the material and symbolic resources it possesses. Administrative regulations enacted by the state affect the functioning of all other fields. Therefore, the state can be thought of as a “space of spaces” or a “field of fields” —a form of meta-power that operates over all other forms of power.

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5. Conclusion

Pierre Bourdieu's analysis of the state and bureaucracy, presents several distinctive points of departure from conventional sociological and political theories. These unique insights shed light on the complex interplay between the state, bureaucracy, symbolic capital, and social domination, highlighting Bourdieu's divergence from other theorists in the following key aspects:

1. Bourdieu advocates for a “negative sociology” of the state, urging scholars and researchers to critically question prevailing assumptions and beliefs about the state's existence and power. This approach challenges conventional perspectives, which often take the state's legitimacy and necessity for granted, and asserts that the state's deep entrenchment in societal consciousness makes it “almost unthinkable.” It also challenges conventional approaches, which often takes the state's legitimacy and necessity for granted, and calls for a more sceptical and reflexive approach to understanding state power.

¹⁴ Another distinguishing difference is related to the entry rules of the bureaucratic field. The rules that regulate entry into other fields are relatively informal. If someone entering a field has access to appropriate social resources (capital), dispositions (*habitus*), and strategies, they can eventually obtain opportunities to reach their desired positions in that field. In contrast, participation in the bureaucratic field is tightly controlled by formal rules. It is nearly impossible for anyone to enter the bureaucratic field without being officially appointed, legally authorized, directly nominated, or invited by those who already occupy bureaucratic positions. An exception to this is coups and revolutions, but even in these cases, field-like dynamics are still at work (Steinmetz, 2014b, p. 5).

2. Bourdieu's theory emphasizes the role of symbolic capital and symbolic violence in maintaining social hierarchies. He argues that symbolic violence, an insidious form of domination rooted in recognition and misrecognition, underpins many aspects of social life. Bourdieu's focus on symbolic capital highlights the state's pivotal role as the "central bank of symbolic capital," responsible for bestowing social identities, privileges, and authorizations. This perspective diverges from theories that prioritize economic or physical coercion as the primary mechanisms of social control.

3. Unlike many traditional sociologist and political theorists who often focus on material or coercive forms of power, Bourdieu places symbolic power at the forefront of his analysis. He emphasizes that the state, beyond its tangible functions, holds a unique form of power rooted in the ability to shape collective beliefs and norms through symbolic means. Symbolic power operates through the production and circulation of symbols and representations that are recognized as legitimate and authoritative. This allows those who control these symbols and representations to exert power and influence over others. In the state field, symbolic power is used to legitimize the state's authority and to maintain social order. Bourdieu's specific emphasis on symbolic power underscores the idea that the state's influence goes far beyond its visible actions, distinguishing it from conventional analyses that primarily centre on overt forms of authority.

4. Bourdieu, instead of viewing the state as a monolithic entity, presents the state as a distinct social space with its own logic, struggles, and interests. This conceptualization allows for a better understanding of how the state interacts with other social fields and forms of capital, exerting its influence over various domains. This perspective challenges the conceptualization of the state as a unitary actor and encourages a more dynamic and multifaceted analysis.

5. Bourdieu's approach to understanding the state field involves analysing the relationships among actors and institutions within the field, as well as the strategies and tactics employed by these actors and institutions to acquire and retain power. He argues that agents and institutions within the state field are engaged in a constant struggle to define and redefine the rules of the game, and that the state itself is a product of these struggles.

6. Bourdieu's analysis of the bureaucratic field challenges a monolithic conceptualization of bureaucracy. He portrays bureaucracy as a hierarchical space where agents with diverse interests and forms of capital vie for the monopoly of legitimation. This perspective contrasts with traditional depictions of bureaucracy as a singular and unified administrative apparatus.

In conclusion, Pierre Bourdieu's distinctive contributions to the study of the state and bureaucracy offer a fresh perspective on how social order, authority, and domination are constructed and maintained. His emphasis on symbolic power, the state as a meta-field, and the role of symbolic capital enriches our understanding of the intricate dynamics shaping contemporary societies. Bourdieu's approach, which challenges conventional assumptions and encourages critical inquiry, provides a strong framework for re-evaluating the intricacies of state power and its influence on our social world.

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