

Sociodicy: Notes on the thought of Pierre Bourdieu

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KEY CONCEPT



A *sociodicy* is a structured attempt to justify the social order in spite of its manifold injustices. Its conceptual lineage can be traced back to the notion of theodicy, or the justification of God despite the existence of evil and suffering, a term that was appropriated and “sociologized” by Max Weber; it was the French mid-20th century sociologist Raymond Aron who expressly coined the term *sociodicy*, even though it was his student and collaborator Pierre Bourdieu who became its most famous and frequent exponent. On Bourdieu’s usage, sociodicies are narratives that try to shield dominant social strata from criticism over inequalities, hierarchy, domination, and social suffering (that is, pain and distress originating from the social order rather than individual pathology). To take just one example: The idea of *social mobility* has functioned as a powerful sociodicy in U.S. society, as Bourdieu and Wacquant (1999: 51) point out, justifying the existence of significant inequalities on the grounds that any one individual has the (theoretical) possibility of climbing up the social ladder—even if this possibility is, in reality, largely illusory.

To take another example: The notion of *meritocracy*—that society ought to be, or is in fact, governed by “the best and the brightest”—can operate as a kind of sociodicy, because the procedures by which one arrives at what constitutes “merits,” such as “intelligence” or “brilliance,” are hardly socially neutral: Determining and deciding “who is best” is interwoven with power and domination. In this sense, the political economist Joseph Schumpeter’s claim that class differences are ultimately expressions of “individual differences in aptitude” (1951: 210) glosses over the crucial question of how “aptitude” is formed and judged in the first place. Defining and assigning merit tends, as Bourdieu repeatedly argued, to reward the offspring of the upper and upper-middle classes, via the biased workings of the school system. When poor, unemployed, or marginalized populations are told they live in a meritocratic society, this suggests that their social inferiority must spring from their personal failings, rather than being the result, say, of a system of inherited privileges, the machinations of social elites, or the vagaries of global markets.

In fact, the emphasis on aptitude and its (allegedly) neutral role in distributing power is one of the main ways in which late-modern social orders justify themselves; in an essay from the 1990s, Bourdieu skewers the neoliberal narrative of the “deserving poor,” which maintains, in Bourdieu’s polemical paraphrase, that “the poor are not just immoral, alcoholic and degenerate, they are stupid, they lack intelligence” (1998: 43). In *Pascalian Meditations*, Bourdieu recounts of an elite group that he calls the “state nobility” (i.e. the credentialed rulers of late-modern knowledge societies), that it “finds the principle of its sociodicy in the educational system and in the qualifications which are presumed to guarantee its competence” (Bourdieu 2000: 79). In other words: a segment of the ruling elite thinks it is in a position of power because of its superior intellectual powers, verified by credentials and diplomas from the education system. Bourdieu goes on to excoriate the ideas of giftedness and innate intelligence as markers of legitimate rulership, describing these variously as the “myth of the ‘natural gift’” or even “the racism of intelligence.” Why does the idea of “intelligence” function as a kind of “racism”? Because it essentializes what is to a large degree socially achieved and ascribes the result to a person’s inherent properties.

Formulaically restated, then, we might say that *sociodicies are the ideas of the dominant, attempting to become dominant ideas, aimed at turning the fact of domination into a dominant truth.*

Social critics tend to think of sociodicies as efforts to justify the unjustifiable, which, as such, are destined to fail, conceptually and theoretically, even though they might, of course, become socially efficacious, in the measure that they attain the status of a social orthodoxy. But a sociodicy is not destined to succeed; indeed, much of what is called politics in essence revolves around attempts at *imposing one or other competing discourses about the essential nature of the social order.* Politics is a ceaseless struggle over sociodicies (even though it is, of course, about much else besides, including material resources and positions). The labor movements of the twentieth century were to a large degree producers of a counter-narrative: Owners and employers were not “captains of

industry” or “creators of wealth,” designations that would legitimize their accumulation of riches; instead, they were revalued as “labor-purchasers” and exploiters of the value-producing working class. Successful subaltern political movements mobilize counter-discourses, attempting to deploy what limited forms of *symbolic power* that remain open to them to confront the sociodicies of dominant elites.

In places, Bourdieu seems to think the chances of such defiance meeting with success are low: “[T]here is, whether one likes it not, very little ‘resistance’ in these matters” (Bourdieu, 2000: 74). This claim is echoed in Marx and Engels’ well-known statement from *The German Ideology* that the “ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e. the class which is the ruling *material* force of society, is at the same time its ruling *intellectual* force” (1970: 64; emphasis in the original). This may be too pessimistic a view in the long-run, even though it is undoubtedly true that notions of desert, privilege, intelligence, and “merit”-based privileges have been remarkably stable across the Western world over the past century.

Background: From Theology to Max Weber

As noted, the concept of sociodicy has its origins in theology. On Leibniz’s (1710/1951) classical account, a *theodicy* is any attempt to reconcile God’s essential goodness with the manifest suffering of this world. Aquinas described God as the *summum bonum*, or “highest good,” in his *Summa Theologiae*, but the theodicean question is how this *Theos* (God) could still be said to be a bearer of *dike* (justice), despite natural “evils” like childhood leukemia or the Lisbon earthquake of 1755 and (moral) evils such as the Holocaust (see e.g. van Inwagen 2006). Theodicies are apologies for God, attempting to make sense of the coexistence of human suffering with an omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent Creator. Thinkers have produced numerous theodicies over the centuries; one early form, for instance, is sometimes called compensation theology, that is, the idea that the afterlife compensates for earthly suffering, which one philosopher shrewdly calls a “Heaven swamps everything” theodicy (Maitzen 2009: 122).

Importing this theological discourse into the social sciences some two centuries after Leibniz, the sociologist Max Weber distinguished between a “theodicy of good fortune” (*Theodizee des Glückes*) and a “theodicy of suffering” (*Theodizee des Leidens*) (see Swedeberg & Agevall 2016; Wacquant 2023). How can the suffering of the dominated be justified? How can the privilege of the dominant be made acceptable? Commentators have noted that while Weber’s apparent concern is to engage with religious thought, he is really far more interested in the *sociology of suffering and privilege*. Even as he used the term “theodicy,” he was already thinking its sociological derivation: “As the underpinning of capitalism and the social order generally, Weber may actually have had in mind sociodicy—the legitimation of society in the face of its failures—as much as the justification of the cultural authority of divinity” (Kleinman 1997: 317).

Of course, a theodicy *can function as sociodicy*. The previously noted idea of compensation theodicy—that the rewards of the afterlife assuage the horrors of everyday reality here and now—clearly has all the qualities of sociodicy: The Church’s religious

teachings in the Middle Ages *justified* the inequalities of feudal society by promising to drown out worldly suffering in an everlasting state of heavenly bliss.

Weber understood that privilege often has a need to justify itself, which is to say that the privileged have an interest in producing accounts that take the sting out of their privilege, both to the “less fortunate,” but also to their own conscience. As Weber astutely observes of the social psychology of wealth and power:

The fortunate is seldom satisfied with the fact of being fortunate. Beyond this, he needs to know that he has a right to his good fortune. He wants to be convinced that he ‘deserves’ it, and above all, that he deserves it in comparison with others. He wishes to be allowed the belief that the less fortunate also merely experience his due. Good fortune thus wants to be ‘legitimate’ fortune.” (Weber 1946: 271)

Weber thinks a “theodicy” of privilege, which is really a secular attempt to legitimize the privileged, is necessary from the standpoint of the psychology of power: The “wound” of domination and privilege needs suturing.

It was the French sociologist Raymond Aron who coined the secular version of the concept, sociodicy (or *sociodicée* in French), as Jon Elster (1983: 56) notes; the venue, writes Elster (1981), was Aron’s 1970 inaugural lecture at the Collège de France (see Aron 2023). From Aron, the concept appears to have filtered by way of intellectual osmosis into Bourdieu’s thinking: Bourdieu was one of Aron’s protégées in the French academic field, starting as his doctoral student, before eventually codirecting the *Centre de sociologie européenne* (Center for European Sociology) in Paris, supported by large grants from, among other sources, the Ford Foundation (Cohen 2023), though Aron would later denounce Bourdieu as a “cult leader, self-confident and dominating” (Aron 2010).

Be that as it may, it became an important concept within Bourdieu’s wider theoretical universe, perhaps because of its close affinities with another keyword in his sociological lexicon, *symbolic power* (the mobilization of, *inter alia*, categories, concepts, and other organizing ideas). Unlike Habermasian appeals to communicative rationality, Bourdieu understood that sociodicy operated at an essentially *ingratiating* level—not necessarily prediscursive, but certainly not reliant upon the clear lining up of syllogisms and arguments in reasoned fashion: That sociodicy which is least recognized *qua* justificatory discourse is perhaps most likely to succeed. A sociodicy works best when it worms its way into the collective consciousness: Who today seriously questions the seemingly self-evident validity and reality of “intelligence” as distributive principle of honor and material-symbolic rewards, outside of a few pockets of critical reflexive thought?

Why Sociodicy?

Let’s consider another illustrative example of sociodicy—more specifically, how extreme wealth inequalities might be justified. A Silicon Valley billionaire might fairly be accused of exploiting workers and hoarding wealth, which is, in the final instance, socially or communally produced. In response, however, a late-modern sociodicy might be

mobilized, responding that the billionaire's super-profits are nevertheless justified due to (i) *heightened risk* (the billionaire could have lost everything at some crucial, earlier stage, and financial and existential risks should be compensated for), (ii) *unique innovations* (the billionaire was the only one to seize upon an opportunity, new idea, or nascent technology, and exceptional talent should be stimulated and rewarded), and, consequently, (iii) *net social benefits* (the spill-over effects of what is admittedly an unsavory wealth accumulation are nevertheless large enough that, in net terms, society as a whole stands to gain). The billionaire may be extremely wealthy, but, so the story goes, we should learn to hold our noses, because the technical and social benefits outweigh the costs of permitting extreme concentrations of wealth. If the price of space rockets or operating systems is an oligarchic elite, then so be it.

All of these admittedly somewhat stylized justifications have their set responses, of course, many of them highly persuasive, but what is interesting is the fact that wealthy, powerful, dominant social agents should feel compelled to produce anything like a sociodicy at all. What drives them to do it?

First, to minimize the shame of privilege, or what we might paradoxically term the *dishonor of esteem* or *the symbolic taint of privilege*. This feeling is certainly not universal but varies across time and place: Elites have at various times felt a lesser or greater compulsion to justify themselves. Russian oligarchs in London have been more at ease in flaunting their wealth, as Elizabeth Schimpfössl (2018) shows: The Austrian sociologist notes that “many wealthy Russians still primarily identify with and express themselves through conspicuous consumption, ostentation, and pomp.” The super-rich of Manhattan, on the other hand, have in recent decades shown signs of significant discomfort with their own privilege, prompting the sociologist Rachel Sherman (2017) to anatomize the “anxieties of affluence” wracking this class. A successful sociodicy soothes the powerful, assuaging their guilty conscience.

Second, to stave off political opposition, radical reforms, or even revolutionary foment. A social order must make itself hegemonic, which means producing discourses of justification, preferably of the preemptive kind. Perhaps the most fitting rhetorical analogy is *prolepsis*, an argumentative move that anticipates counterarguments before they are made to bolster one's own position. A successful sociodicy nips radical dissent in the bud, offering a justificatory discourse to take the sting out of radical reforms or even revolutionism before they are able to ingratiate themselves.

Symbolic Power, Ideology, and Sociodicy

In short, sociodicies are the narratives of the dominant, imposed on the dominated, so that the dominant might continue to dominate. Any time a rich person says they are rich because they are especially intelligent or clever, or possess some other exceptional (achieved, not ascribed or inherited) personal characteristics—from fitness to charisma—they are in some sense “doing sociodicy.” When the poor are told that they are poor because they are unintelligent, lazy, immoral, or make poor decisions, they are on the receiving end of sociodicy.

Bourdieu thinks of neoliberalism as a sociodicy, and more specifically, that part of neoliberal doctrine purporting that “the economic and social world is structured by equations” in ways that erase the potential of human freedom and political agency (Bourdieu 1998: 35): “It is by arming itself with mathematics (and power over the media) that neo-liberalism has become the supreme form of the conservative sociodicy which started to appear some thirty years ago as ‘the end of ideology’, or more recently, as ‘the end of history’.” Francis Fukuyama’s (1992) idea that liberal capitalism was the only viable political-economic ideology in the post-Cold War era was itself a kind of sociodicy, because it justified whatever structures of power and domination that existed on grounds of historical necessity: There was literally no other alternative, to echo Thatcher’s famous phrase.

The concept of sociodicy is closely linked to another key notion in Bourdieu’s lexicon, *symbolic power*, denoting the imposition of categories, concepts, and organizing “principles of vision and division,” that is, ways of seeing and apportioning social resources or energies (in the broadest sense). We might think of sociodicy as a subtype of symbolic power. Symbolic power is the wider term, including any kind of group-making categorical division of the population.

The concept of sociodicy might seem overly catholic: Its wide scope suggests its semantic coverage bleeds over into the terminological landscape of keywords like “hegemony” or “ideology”; in his introductory textbook, *Sociology*, John Macionis defines ideology precisely as “cultural beliefs that justify particular social arrangements, including patterns of inequality” (2012: 231), echoing the definition of sociodicy outlined above. But ideology has a dozen other meanings besides, varying with whomever one asks, while sociodicy is undoubtedly more clear-cut and unequivocally defined. Ideology has been thought of in even wider terms (up to any kind of systematic idea about any sort of thing), while sociodicy more straightforwardly denotes *justifications of the social order*.

The great value of sociodicy, then, lies in its emphasis on the idea that one of the key stakes in politics is whether the dominant will succeed in making that which is untenable appear not only good, but necessary. If sociodicy succeeds, what chance for freedom?

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