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The Tricky “True Object”: Bourdieu’s Masculine Domination and Historicity”

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The Tricky “True Object”: Bourdieu’s Masculine Domination and Historicity

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Abstract

Pierre Bourdieu’s *Domination masculine* (1998) has an earlier version published as an article in 1990. In order to deconstruct in vivo the working of sociological paradigm-alchemy, a close reading of the Bourdieusian narratives is offered. The paper starts with a comparison of the article and the book. After summing up the main claims of the book’s critical reception, Bourdieu’s statements are intended to be questioned, according to which the school, the family, the state and the church would reproduce, in the long run, masculine domination. The paper also seeks to identify the methodological trick of the Bourdieusian vision on history, namely that, metaphorically speaking, he compares the streaming river to the riverside cliffs. It is argued that when Bourdieu discusses “the constancy of habitus”, the “permanence in and through change”, or the “strength of the structure”, he extends his paradigm about the displacement of the social structure to the displacement of the men/women relationship. Hence, it is suggested that, in opposition to Bourdieu’s thesis, masculine domination is not of universal validity but its structural weight and character have fundamentally changed in the long run.

Keywords: domination masculine, Bourdieu, historicity

El Complicado “Objeto Real”: La Dominación Masculina de Bourdieu y la Historicidad

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Resumen

La dominación masculina de Pierre Bourdieu (1998) tiene una versión anterior publicada como artículo en 1990. Con el fin de deconstruir el funcionamiento del paradigma sociológico-alquimia, se ofrece una lectura atenta de las narrativas alrededor de este autor. El artículo comienza con una comparación del artículo y el libro mencionados. Después de resumir las principales contribuciones alrededor de la recepción crítica del libro, los argumentos de Bourdieu son cuestionados, en particular sobre su posicionamiento alrededor de la escuela, la familia, el estado y la iglesia, las cuales se encargan de reproducir, a largo plazo, la dominación masculina. El artículo también trata de identificar el truco metodológico de la visión bourdieusiana en la historia, a saber, que, metafóricamente hablando, se compara el río a los acantilados de la orilla. Se argumenta que cuando Bourdieu habla de "la constancia de habitus", la "permanencia y mediante el cambio", o la "resistencia de la estructura", se extiende en su postura sobre el desplazamiento de la estructura social y el desplazamiento de la relación hombres - mujeres. Por lo tanto, se sugiere que, en oposición a la tesis de Bourdieu, la dominación masculina no es de validez universal ya que su peso estructural y carácter han cambiado de manera fundamental en los últimos años.

Palabras clave: dominación masculina, Bourdieu, historicidad

Pierre Bourdieu’s *Masculine Domination* (Bourdieu, 1998) was granted the privilege of becoming a sociological classic in his lifetime. Published in French in 1988 and then within a few years in several languages, this publication is noteworthy for several reasons. First, since publication in 1998 it has had unparalleled appeal in France, being published in 78 000 copies in 1998 and another 30 000 copies four years later. These are stellar numbers for a social science publication. Of his works, only *La misere du monde* (1993) and the items of the *Liber Raison d’agir*-series were printed in more copies (Thébaud, 2006, pp. 175-176). Second, it is important because – though gender inequalities were latently included in earlier phases of the oeuvre – it became the target of concentrated attention towards the end of the author’s career and can, therefore, help the reinterpretation of the life’s work retrospectively. Thirdly, the book is intriguing because like a teaching aid it demonstrates several virtues and limitations of Bourdieu’s thinking in a concentrated form. Below, after starting with a short comparison of the *Masculine Domination*’s two versions, the main statements of the book’s critical reception will be summed up. Then, on the basis of questioning Bourdieu’s claims, namely that the school, the family, the state and the church would reproduce, in the long run, masculine domination, the paper will seek to identify the main problem of the Bourdieusian vision on history.

The Article and the Book

When the readers take the English version of Pierre Bourdieu’s *Masculine Domination* (2001) in hand, they are probably unaware that this book has an earlier version (Bourdieu, 1990) published as an article in *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, the journal he founded in 1975 and headed until his death. We thus have the exceptional chance to steal a glimpse of the creative Bourdieusian workshop and study in vivo the working of the sociological paradigm-alchemy by starting with a short comparison of the article of 1990 and the book of 1998.

The main thesis of the article is that masculine domination – actually the model of all kinds of domination – is a social institution deeply inculcated in the objective social and subjective mental structures over the millennia, practically structured by the same laws in the pre-modern Kabyle society of

the Mediterranean region as in London's Bloomsbury district in the early 20th century, in Virginia Woolf's circle. The basis for its emergence is the libido dominandi or the instinctive desire after domination, a sort of sense of duty based on an inner drive that a man "owes himself", acquired unconsciously in the course of socialisation. This drive, or *illiusio dominandi*, is constitutive of masculinity, and causes men to be socially instituted to let themselves be caught up, like children, in all the games of domination that are socially assigned to them, of which the form par excellence is war. At the same time, men also become victims – victims of their own illusion.

In this sexually determined, "sexualized and sexualizing" social order of labour division, men are active mainly in the public spheres, while women in the non-public, private spheres are not oriented towards profit or power and mostly require unlimited time input. The latter are practically goods of exchange in the games of men based on honour and dignity, serving in this capacity the reproduction of men's symbolic capital. Women, argues the author, are disposed to generate liking, hence it is no wonder that they spend a considerable part of their time with cosmetic work. They are mainly in charge of the ceremonies organised upon aesthetic rules (family and firm feasts, literary salons, receptions, etc.), so they may fill important positions in different cultural fields and are specialised for producing, differentiating symbolic distinctions. Besides, continues Bourdieu, borrowing the nice metaphor of Virginia Woolf, they act as flattering mirrors in which men can view their enlarged images. Ultimately, then, all women do enrich the wealth of men who possess them. At the same time, they have the perspicacity of the outsiders, so they can view the "most serious" games of men "with amused indulgence".

It is ascribed salient significance to habitus, i.e. behavioural patterns fixed in durable dispositions, which govern human praxis at the non-conscious level; being perceptible, these "structured, structural structures" are liable to social classification and differentiation. Bourdieu writes about "the somatisation of power relations", and formulates the thesis according to which the socially constructed biological body is also a politicised body, or, more precisely, no less than "embodied politics". He refers, among others, to elementary school education which incorporates in the dispositions of growing generations a multitude of sexually differentiated

ethical, political, or even cosmological elements – e.g. teaching pupils how to hold the (masculine) right hand, how to walk, look into someone’s eyes, dress – and so on, and so forth...

The arguments are supported on the basis of two empirical references. The main empirical source is the pre-modern Kabylean community in Algeria, where women are mainly associated with negative connotations while men with positive ones (they are like nobles, notes the author). All activities connected with the concepts of “internal”, “damp”, “low” and “crooked” (not only child-rearing but such dirty chores as mucking out the stable) are performed by women, as compared to the “external”, “official”, “straight”, “dry”, “tall” (etc.) activities of men. Interesting paragraphs can be read about the manifestation of the major cultural oppositions in the division of the body: high/low, up/down, pure/ impure, public/ private, legitimate/illegitimate. (Typically enough, the sexual intercourse itself is deemed “normal” and “classical” in the case where man is over woman, while all other positions of love-making are condemned as perverted and often penalised by sanctions.)

The other reference is Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse*, the protagonist of which, Mr Ramsey is an excellent figure to illustrate modern-time masculine dispositions based on the *libido academica*, i.e. a special variation of the *libido dominandi*. An early 20th-century academic intellectual, Mr Ramsey is a man “of whose words are verdicts”, all whose predictions “are self-fulfilling, they make themselves true”, and whose “paternal prophecy is both a forecast of science and a prediction of wisdom, which sends the future into the past”. He experiences the fantasies of *libido academica* which express themselves in warlike games: “Yet he would not die lying down; he would find some crag of rock, and there, his eyes fixed on the storm ... he would die standing” (Woolf is quoted by Bourdieu – Bourdieu’s italics).

These statements are formulated almost unchanged in the book of 1998: there is no substantial difference between the two texts as to the set of concepts and the empirical basis. However, there are significant differences between the two versions. First, to start with a seemingly less important element, there are considerable aesthetic differences between the two versions, to the benefit of the latter. Bourdieu was presumably dissatisfied with the formal structure of the article. As a *normalien*, i.e. one-time student

of a Grande École of the French social scientific elite of greatest prestige, the École Normale Supérieure founded by Napoleon, he would have been heir to a philosophical tradition which ascribes at least as much significance to the “form” as to the “contents”. That means that ideas should be put forth with the elegance of the continuous resolution of (seeming) paradoxes arising from binary oppositions. Needless to say: this obligation is satisfied with self-evident ease in the author’s first text variant, too – as in nearly all his works.

While the article was divided into seven chapters of varying length and more or less ad hoc titles (Symbolic rape: physical compulsion; Somatisation of power relations; Social construction of sexuality; Social genesis of illusion and libido dominandi; Clear-sightedness of the outsiders; Women as objects of exchange; The institutional libido), the book appears to comply more thoroughly with the formal requirements of the scholastic tradition. It is divided into three parts, the first (A magnified image) containing five, the last (Permanence and change) four (?)¹, the middle chapter (Anamneses of the hidden constants) three sections, and the whole being framed by a preamble and a conclusion. Thus, a quasi-symmetry is created, which is at the same time put in parentheses via a subtle structural dissonance, in order to avoid the appearance of orthodox conservatism.

In the English version, the Latin references are lost. The “preamble” is rendered as “prelude”, the “post-scriptum” as “postscript”, the latter omitted from the contents; hence the discussion about love is “hidden” in the English edition. The post-scriptum may belong to the third part – extending it to five sections – or may not. It also depends on the vantage point whether the appendix is taken for an essential (sub) chapter upsetting the formal balance, or for a structural unit of secondary importance compared to the primary argumentation. At any rate, the fact that the author attaches this section after his final conclusion appears to suggest that his thoughts about the gay and lesbian movement are beyond his main concern.

But however important the requirements of a rhetoric tradition may be, they are certainly insufficient to prompt a new text variant. That needs other things, too. Such as – to mention another important factor that has great significance in the French intellectual context with a penchant for subtle distinctions – the altered reference horizon that is deemed important for the argumentation. Taking a close look at the sources and references in the two

texts, considerable differences can be found. What first strikes the eye is the conspicuously high number of self-citations (eight in the article and fourteen in the book). The index of the French edition does not contain the Bourdieu name, so the self-citations can only be gleaned from the text one by one.

The English version is more correct, including the Bourdieu-item in the index. It is not clear, however, why only eight of his works are named as references. Furthermore, the number of an item's occurrence is also lower than actually is the case. For example, out of the 14 references to *The Logic of Practice*, a mere four are noted in the English edition. The other four self-references of the article (*Le nord et le midi*; *L'ontologie politique de Martin Heidegger*, *La noblesse d'état* and *Le patronat*) are not included in the book. By contrast, there are six references in the book to pre-1990 writings that are not named in the article. All in all, the number of self-references is seventeen in the article and twenty-seven in the book.

As for references to others, in both versions, there are relatively few citations of other authors. Still, there are far more references in the book, so it is clear – especially in the light of what was said above about the formal structure – that the enlarged version satisfies more completely the requirements of scholasticism. The top list of authors in the book is led by Foucault and Sartre with four mentions, respectively. Foucault's importance had grown with the passing of the time (from one reference in the article). Although in most cases his name appears in a polemic context, the fact that Bourdieu finds him (of all people) worth arguing with is significant. The opposite is the case with Sartre. In the article there is a lengthy, though small-typed, particularly méchant passage about how the philosopher's private imagination-laden with fears of castration, conceiving of the sexual act via the metaphor of “a wasp drowned in jam”, becomes a “fundamental philosophical intuition” – a kind of intuition that discusses with self-evident ease the “honey-sweet death of the für-sich” (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 15)².

In the article, he makes a reference to some thirty authors, usually one (rarely two-three) time(s). They include those often cited in other Bourdieu works (Bergson, Goffmann, Kant, Husserl, Kafka, Lévi-Strauss, Van Gennep, Freud, Lacan) and some less known, mainly French researchers not connected to feminism. In a footnote, he refers to the “feminist discourse stranded frequently in essentialism” (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 4),

naming Féral, Irigaray and Kristeva. Far more authors are cited in the book, usually also only once. From these references, however, not only Féral, Irigaray and Kristeva, but other key authors of Gender Studies are also missing – although he refers to post-1990 works at least thirty times. Among the feminist authors, MacKinnon's *Feminism Unmodified* (1987) is quoted three times, Chodorow's *The Reproduction of Mothering...* (1978) is referred to twice, Lee Bartky's *Femininity and Domination...* (1990) is mentioned once. Judith Butler is also mentioned, but – not really correctly – the citation from her is used in support of Bourdieu's argument:

Judith Butler herself seems to reject the “voluntaristic” view of gender that she seemed to put forward in *Gender Trouble*, when she writes [in *Bodies that Matter*]: ‘The misapprehension about gender performativity is this: that gender is a choice, or that gender is a role, or that gender is a construction that one puts on, as one puts clothes on in the morning’ (Butler 1990, p. 103; quoted in Bourdieu, 2001, p. 103).

Unfortunately, Bourdieu forgets to note here that in this passage Butler words the critique of the extreme interpretations of the *Gender Trouble*. It is thus far from discarding her previous theory, as Bourdieu claims.

The most important difference between the two texts is that Bourdieu includes a completely new chapter, entitled *Permanence and Change*, plus an appendix and post-scriptum into the book. The inclusion of these new texts, however, does not alter the main thesis about the universality and pertinence of masculine domination. On the contrary: his main thesis is that

The changes visible in conditions in fact conceal permanent features in the relative positions: the levelling-out of the chances of access and rates of representation should not be allowed to mask the inequalities which persist in the distribution of boys and girls among the various types of schooling and therefore among possible careers (Bourdieu, 2001, p. 90).

He uses the term “permanence in and through change” (Bourdieu, 2001, p. 91), by claiming that:

Whatever their position in the social space, women have in common the fact that they are separated from men by a negative symbolic coefficient which, like skin colour for blacks, or any other sign of membership of a stigmatized group, negatively affects everything that they are and do, and which is the source of a systematic set of homologous differences (Bourdieu, 2001, p. 93).

Consequently, “the structure of the gaps is maintained” (Bourdieu, 2001, p. 91) because “girls internalize, in the form of schemes of perception and appreciation not readily accessible to consciousness, the principles of the dominant vision” (Bourdieu, 2001, p. 95). Or to put it differently: “the constancy of habitus (...) is one of the most important factors in the relative constancy of the structure of the sexual division of labour” (Bourdieu, 2001, p. 95).

In the post-scriptum, writing about domination and love – he states that in border cases there might be exceptions to the general rule of masculine domination. Such a border case is “the enchanted island of love, a closed and perfectly autarkic world which is the site of a continuous series of miracles, can be snatched from the icy waters of calculation, violence and self-interest” (Bourdieu, 2001, p. 110). In the appendix dealing with the gay and lesbian movement, he raises the following questions: “How can one stand up to a hypocritical universalism without universalising a particularism? (...) How can one prevent the conquests of the movement from ending up as a form of ghettoisation?” (Bourdieu, 2001, p. 123) Undoubtedly, the fact that he formulates the problems connected to the gay and lesbian movement in the form of questions suggests some relaxation of his rigid position represented by the article of 1990 where he writes:

Women’s studies, black studies, gay studies (...), by turning a social problem raised by a dominated group into a sociological problem without any special procedure, ignore everything that constitutes the reality of the topic while they exchange the social relation of domination with a substantial entity, with an essence, thought in itself and for itself, with an idea of a complementary entity (as happened in the case of men’s studies, too) (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 30).

Critiques to Masculine Domination

The fact itself that the most prestigious and most often quoted sociologist of the last decades of the 20th century has written a book on masculine domination draws the attention of the international scientific community to this issue. As it was pointed out, Bourdieu gives an elegant and witty analysis of pre-modern mountain Kabyle society, stressing the social embeddedness of masculine domination and its decisive structural weight. The book convincingly points out to certain permanent elements of masculine domination, proving that the habitus-concept might be relevant if we would like to study symbolic domination and symbolic violence. The value of the book is further enhanced by some conceptual innovations, like *libido dominandi* as the dispositional foundation of masculine domination and some related categories (*libido sciendi*, *libido academica*, *illusion dominandi*).

That said, however, several critical remarks have also been formulated in the 17 years since the publication of *Masculine Domination*. Most of them find the book wanting in providing adequate empirical grounds for the statements³. As Wallace (2003) puts it:

The sole "data" that informs *Masculine Domination* comes from anthropological information about the Kabyle society (a Mediterranean ethnic group) that Bourdieu gathered in the 1960s and a reading of Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*. By comparison with the thoroughness of his earlier work, *Masculine Domination* seems a brisk treatment of a subject that does not have Bourdieu's full attention. (...). As Terry Lovell (one of Bourdieu's most frequent and incisive critics) points out, "it is not always possible to know when [Bourdieu] is restricting his observations to the particular case of Kabyle society, when he is extending them to encompass the whole Mediterranean culture of honour/shame, including that of the modern period, and when he is offering universal generalizations (p. 20).

Undoubtedly, as Toril Moi writes (Moi 1991, p. 1033) "Bourdieu's empirical data are almost exclusively from his investigations among the Kabyle people of Algeria carried on in the 1950s which he has not updated or put to self-reflection". This makes Anne Witz accuse him of "dubious

gender anthropology” (Witz 2004, p. 211). Particularly defective are his concrete references to late 20th century developments; ignoring these does reduce the relevance of the author’s ambition to provide a broad historical horizon. This neglect of data is unusual for Bourdieu whose best works (for example Bourdieu 1984, 1989, 1992, 1993) are characterised by a sophisticated interpretation of subtle qualitative and quantitative variables. In short, it is not unfounded to suspect that in this work he only collected the arguments that would substantiate his preconceived thesis.

Another group of critical remarks charge the author with “determinism” and “pessimism”, referring to a problem often raised in the critical interpretation of the whole Bourdieusian oeuvre. Some critics say Bourdieu’s thinking is characterized by a “hyperfunctionalist”, extreme structuralism (Joas & Knöbl, 2011, p. 25)⁴; others, more politely, opine that “the author is more at home in analyzing the specificities of reproduction than those of social change” (Perrot et al., 1999, p. 209). Again some claim that “he overemphasises the significance of order and structure” (Skeggs 2004, p. 30) while some more poignant critics (Chambers, 2005) charge that “he rules out social change”:

Parts of Bourdieu’s analysis also imply that it will be difficult if not impossible for us even to conceptualise radical change, for he asserts that women living under patriarchy lack the cognitive resources to do so (Bourdieu 2001, p. 35, 2000, p. 170). Such a conclusion is problematic for it seems to rule out social change, and conflicts with the fact that change does occur, sometimes as the result of radical theorizing, for example of feminists about and against patriarchy. Bourdieu’s contention that change in consciousness also requires change in the underlying social structures does have some force (p. 334).

There are critics who think that “the living conditions, practices, views and struggles of women today are not reflected at all in Bourdieu’s text, which instead paints the picture of a gender order so completely doxic and closed that it seems almost totalitarian” (Krais, 2006). Here is the root of his pessimism, for a viewpoint that “his view of the perpetual reproduction of class-based inequality appears to leave little prospect that things will get better” (Joas & Knöbl, 2011, p. 29). Although Bridget Fowler (the most

sympathetic of British feminists toward Bourdieu's theory) stresses that Bourdieu's praxis theory is not totally deterministic, for in the final analysis people always have the possibility of reflection⁵, she still takes the view that Masculine Domination cannot grasp the periods of the transformation of patriarchic structure with due subtlety, and is particularly defective in the analysis of changes in the period of capitalist modernity (Fowler, 2003).

In addition, another group of critical remarks, related to the above-cited ones, argue that the author fails to refer to the literature on gender studies. "There is something frustrating about the ease and briskness with which Bourdieu dismisses whole schools of feminist thought" – argues Wallace (2003). Some critics acidly note that for the lack of citations, for the gross references and ambiguous allusions Bourdieu's dissertation would not pass the test in the first year of a PhD course (Mathieu, 1999). According to Lovell (2001),

Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray share a footnote in the 1990 version in which they are summarily dismissed as essentialist – a familiar charge, but one against which defences have been mounted (Grosz, 1989; Whitford, 1991). Even this backhanded acknowledgement has disappeared by 1998. Bourdieu's lack of engagement with those who already occupy the well-tilled 'field' of gender studies is quite remarkable (p. 44).

Several reviewers propose that when a sociologist in a dominant position, who happens to be male, almost perfectly ignores the bulk of feminist and gender literature in a work on gender themes, and thus impairs the significance of the female agent's history-forming power, he does not only represent the historical processes in a false light but also serves the symbolic reproduction of masculine domination (Lagrave, 2003, pp. 316-317). As Beate Kraus (2006) puts it:

To reconstruct the standpoints of others – in this case, of women – Bourdieu would have had to do a thorough reading of the feminist research, which would have meant recognizing his feminist colleagues as 'equal players' in the intellectual field. Instead, he limited himself to his two 'extreme cases': his old material from Kabylia, and Virginia Woolf's description of a bourgeois British family at the beginning of the 20th century (in her novel *To the*

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Lighthouse, 1927), arguing that this approach could overcome the familiarity of the gender order and achieve the objectifying distance needed for the analysis. (...) It is difficult to understand why Bourdieu – who in his other works emphasizes the importance of symbolic conflict and struggle – pays only cursory attention to the symbolic struggles over the gender order. (...) Apparently, it is difficult even for critical male social scientists to reflect upon their own masculine position. On the other hand, critical female scientists often seem to share a similar blind spot as regards their own position, and a similar hesitance to accept the contributions of male colleagues who dare enter their territory – particularly those who represent strong analytical positions – like Bourdieu (pp. 123-124).

True enough: Bourdieu primarily calls feminist historiography to account for the study of institutions contributing to the maintenance of permanence, and by this rhetorical device he underestimates the importance of the agency of the feminist movement and the scientific reflection upon it. As he (Bourdieu, 2001) writes,

a history of women (...) cannot be content, for example, to record the exclusion of women from this or that occupation, this or that branch or discipline; it must also take note of and explain the reproduction both the hierarchies (occupational, disciplinary, etc.) and of the hierarchical dispositions which they favour and which lead women to contribute to their own exclusion from the places from which they are in any case excluded (p. 83).

It can be added that *Masculine Domination* reflects minimally on a few authors of feminist literature, but wholly ignores the representatives of the *Studies on Men and Masculinities*, making no attempt to ascribe the least importance to the plurality and differentiation of masculinity by involving in his analysis such key categories as Connell’s hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1996), Brittan’s concept of “masculinism” (Brittan, 1989) or Whitehead’s (2002) masculine subjectivity. Nor is he interested in looking at forms of “masculine bonding” that is, different forms of connection and cooperation between men (clubs, pubs, sports communities, the army),

although this theme has become unavoidably institutionalised in Anglo-Saxon social historiography (Tosh, 1994).

School, Family, State and Church: Institutions of Permanence?

In the new chapter of the book, aiming to set “the historical labour of dehistoricisation”, Bourdieu declares that “the major change has doubtless been that masculine domination no longer imposes itself with the transparency of something taken for granted. Thanks, in particular, to the immense critical effort of the feminist movement” (Bourdieu, 2001, p. 88). By referring to the increased access to secondary and higher education, waged work, public sphere, the degree of distancing from domestic tasks and reproductive functions, he also mentions “the substantive transformations seen in the conditions of women, especially in the most advantaged social categories” (Bourdieu, 2001, p. 88). However, as we have seen earlier, his main thesis is that “the structure of the gaps is maintained” between men and women (Bourdieu 2001, p. 91), and that “women have in common the fact that they are separated from men by a negative symbolic coefficient” (Bourdieu, 2001, p. 93). He defines the study of social institutions (church, state, school, family) sustaining continuity as the primary task of the approach to “the history of women” (Bourdieu, 2001):

In fact, it is clear that the eternal, in history, cannot be anything other than the product of historical labour of externalisation. It follows that, in order to escape completely from essentialism, one should not try to deny the permanences and the invariants, which are indisputably part of historical reality, but, rather, one must reconstruct the history of the historical labour of dehistoricisation, or, to put it another way, the history of the continuous (re)creation of the objective and subjective structures of masculine domination. (...) Historical research cannot limit itself to describing the transformations over time of the conditions of women, or even the relationship between the sexes in the different epoch. It must aim to establish, for each period, the state of system of agents and institutions – family, church, state, educational system, etc., which, with different weights and different means at different times, have

helped to remove the relations of masculine more or less completely from history” (pp. 82-83).

The question can be raised whether the school, the family, the state and the church have contributed, as it is claimed, to the maintenance of permanence. The most often mentioned institution by Bourdieu (2001) is the school⁶:

The educational system, even when it had freed itself from the grip of church, continued to transmit the presuppositions of the patriarchal representation (based on the homology between the men/women relationship and the adult/child relationship) and, perhaps most importantly, those that are inscribed in its own hierarchical structures, all sexually characterized, between the various schools and faculties, between the disciplines (‘soft’ or ‘hard’ – or, closer to the original mythical intuition – ‘desiccating’), between specialisms, that is, between ways of being and ways of seeing, or seeing oneself, one’s aptitudes and inclinations, in short, everything that combines to form not only social destinies but also self-images (p. 86).

Taking a short-term perspective one may argue that women may primarily be successful in traditionally feminine, provident occupations, their pay is lower than men’s and that in most segments of the labour market the dominant positions are taken by men. When, however, the theme is looked at in a complex long-term historical context, it is particularly questionable that in the western world the school reproduces the gender differences in the long run. It cannot be ignored (and this fact is so obvious that it needs no references to prove) that while prior to the 19th century only daughters of upper-class families could have systematic private tutoring for many years, from the late 19th century women could also take part, first in elementary and intermediate levels of public education and from the 20th century in higher education as well.

The long-term perspective clearly shows that while a hundred and fifty or two hundred years ago the overwhelming majority of women were locked out of the institutions of education, from the second half of the 20th century they have been present at all educational levels just like men. What is more, at the onset of the 21st-century women have a higher rate of

schooling (and better results) in the younger generations than men. (It is not necessary to embark upon the impact of this phenomenon on the labour market and the division of work in the household). In other words: while the schools of the 19th century and earlier were almost exclusively peopled by men (as teachers, students and auxiliary staff), by the end of the 20th century, the structural gap between genders had disappeared. Consequently, the institution of education does not maintain the permanence of masculine domination, but serves the power balance between genders!

Having a look at the subject index of the French edition, it can be found that the notion “family” used on 13 pages (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 138), but the relevant quotations are far shorter than those about school. Although it is mentioned that some changes have occurred but Bourdieu (2001) puts the emphasis on the factors of permanence:

The family undoubtedly played the most important part in the reproduction of masculine domination and the masculine vision, it is here that early experience of the sexual division of labour and the legitimate representation of that division, guaranteed by law and inscribed in language, imposes itself (p. 85).

Oddly enough, the validity of this strong statement is considerably decreased by being the only sentence in the whole book about the role of the family in the reproduction of masculine domination!⁷ Bourdieu mentions Chodorow’s (1978) famous book, but he fails to refer to a single researcher of family history. It may then be not farfetched to state that his idea of the correlation between family and masculine domination is tendentious and sketchy⁸. That is particularly conspicuous against the background of immense literature on the theme produced in the past half a century.

One of the most relevant of these traditions is the “Sentiments Approach” among the followers of which there is a consensus that before the 17th century marriage was an economic, production-oriented and procreative unit in which the sexual act was not aimed at procreation but was considered as a sin (Aries, 1960; Shorter, 1976; Flandrin, 1979; Anderson, 1980; Stone, 1982). The prime aim of marriage was to (re)produce fortune and social position from one generation to the other. According to Stone (1982) and Flandrin (1979), in this early period, there

were no modern-type emotional ties between family members. From the 17th century onwards important changes began. As Philippe Aries demonstrated in his often-quoted book (Aries, 1960), in aristocratic and highly educated families attitudes towards children gradually changed: specific children’s dress, toys, readings, games, and pedagogical programmes were devised for them, which means that the conditions for the emergence of “childhood” as a separate life period starts to be created. The “birth” of childhood entailed the parallel emergence of parenthood, that is, the development of the modern institution of maternal and paternal activities requiring the internalisation of appropriate emotions, duties, and goal-oriented educational tasks.

All of these authors point out that the significance of the intimate sphere is upgraded in this process: husbands spend more time at home, in the company of their wives. “What really distinguishes the nuclear family (...) from other patterns of life in Western society is a special sense of solidarity that separates the domestic unit from the surrounding community” – writes Shorter in his groundbreaking “Making of the Modern Family” (Shorter, 1976, p. 205). Or, as Anderson (1994) formulates it: “from the second half of the 18th century “domesticity had reached its zenith and spread to other social groups. (...) The home came to be seen as a haven, a retreat from the pressures of a capitalistically oriented competitive world” (Anderson, 1994, p. 47). Although it is still the man who is the master of the household, the strengthening of emotional ties in family life softens the rigidity of patriarchal dominance. With the decrease in family size and the increase in the importance of the child-rearing mother the centre of family life moves – to use Mary Ryan formulation – “from patriarchal authority to maternal affection” (Ryan, 1981, p. 102). The invention of modern motherhood (Dally, 1982; Badinter, 1981) and the identification of maternal activity with the essence of femininity mean that the growing legitimacy of the woman – paradoxically – will be rooted in the “mysterious,” “natural” and “irrational” otherness of the “weaker sex”.

Bourdieu simply ignores perhaps the most momentous social change of the last third of the 20th century: the transformation of intimacy. He seems to overlook that from the 1960s something changed irrevocably in the Western world: a growing number of women have gained legitimate control of their own bodies. That does not merely mean their right to decide about

abortion, but also their growing claim to the right of sexual satisfaction⁹. Consequently, whilst the influence of the female agent increases, the legitimacy of masculine violence monopoly decreases. This process implies that men have to control their violent impulses in the intimate sphere and to incorporate dispositional elements that were associated with women in previous millennia. Consequently, the institution of the family does not maintain the permanence of masculine domination, but serves the power balance between genders!

According to Bourdieu, the third key protagonist in dehistoricization and the maintenance of masculine domination is the state, with 9 loci in the index (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 138). As he writes (Bourdieu, 2001):

[The state] has ratified and underscored the prescriptions and proscriptions of private patriarchy with those of public patriarchy inscribed in all the institutions charged with managing and regulating the everyday existence of the domestic unit. Without reaching the extremes of paternalist, authoritarian states (such as France under Pétain or Spain under Franco), full-scale realizations of the ultra-conservative vision which makes the patriarchal family the principle and model of the social order interpreted as moral order, based on the absolute pre-eminence of men over women, adults over children, and on identification of morality with the strength, courage and self-control of the body, the seat of temptations and desires, modern states have inscribed all the fundamental principles of the androcentric vision in the rules defining the official status of citizens (p. 87).

Unfortunately, Bourdieu does not differentiate between the mid-20th century rightwing authoritarian states and the late 20th century, leftist social democratic “provident” states, among other things. Nor does he find it important to reflect upon the historically-culturally determined differences between, say, the Italian or Swedish state structures. And he also fails to consider how the functions of the state are connected to the other institutions, the family, school and church(es) in the long run – although several great narratives are at his disposal. The strongest thesis is offered by Norbert Elias’ opus magnum (Elias, 2000), in which the long-term transformations in the behaviour of the secular upper classes in the West are put under scrutiny. The kernel of the Eliasian argument is that upon

external social pressures, people develop self-control mechanisms which suppress “uncivilized”, animal-like behavioural elements based on violence. These suppressions function as feelings of shame, confusion and embarrassment. Hence, these feelings are not natural endowments but the internalised products of social-historical circumstances, namely that violence control is to be traced to the emerging state monopoly of violence and taxation.

Through the formation of monopolies of force, the threat which one person represents for another is subject to stricter control and becomes more calculable. Everyday life is freer of sudden reversals of fortune. Physical violence is confined to barracks, and from this store-house, it breaks out only in extreme cases, in times of war or social upheaval, into individual life. (...) When a monopoly is formed, pacified social spaces are created which are normally free from acts of violence (Elias, 2000, pp. 369-372).

In volume two of the book, Elias devotes a chapter (“Dynamics of Feudalization”) to the increase of population after the great migration, the internal expansion of society, the formation of new social organs and instrument, among other things (Elias, 2000, pp. 195-256). In chapter two of volume 2 (“On the Sociogenesis of the State”) he gives a systematic analysis of the interdependencies between state formation and civilizing process (Elias, 2000, pp. 257-362). If we take seriously the Eliasian thesis according to which,

The rise in the division of functions also brings more and more people, larger and larger populated areas, into dependence on one another; it requires and instils greater restraint in the individual, more exact control of his or her affects and conduct, it demands a stricter regulation of drives and – from a particular stage on – more even self-restraint (Elias, 2000, p. 429).

We might argue that whilst the influence of the female agent increases, the legitimacy of masculine violence monopoly decreases. To put it differently: according to Elias, the long-term psychologisation and pacification of social life imply that men have to control their violent impulses in different social spheres (including the intimate sphere), and to

incorporate dispositional elements that were associated with women in previous centuries. Consequently, in the long run, the institution of state does not maintain the permanence of masculine domination, but serves the power balance between genders!

Let us finally say something about the church! Three continuous sentences can be found in the book (Bourdieu, 2001) about this institution (the index of the French edition refers to six pages where the concept of “church” appears):

As for the church, pervaded by the deep-seated anti-feminism of a clergy that was quick to condemn all female offences against decency, especially in matters of attire, and was the authorized reproducer of pessimistic vision of women and womanhood, it explicitly inculcates (or used to inculcate)¹⁰ a familialist morality, entirely dominated by patriarchal values, with, in particular, the dogma of the radical inferiority of women. In addition, it acts, more indirectly, on the historical structures of the unconscious, notably through the symbolism of the sacred texts, the liturgy and even religious space and time (p. 85).

He bases his arguments on three references, each dealing with a specific implication of Catholicism¹¹. Unfortunately, these incidental references are not sufficient even for a sketchy outline of the historical dynamism of Catholic Church and Catholicism, just as the allusion to the conditions four or five centuries earlier does not have the force of evidence if valid statements about the role of the church in the maintenance of masculine domination are to be substantiated. Undoubtedly, a highly complex set of phenomena is to be considered, for the Roman Catholic Church has changed thoroughly in Europe in the past centuries. Moreover, different focal points and phenomena would have to be chosen for study when the topic is, let's say, the Italian, the Irish, or the Polish Catholic Church, or, for that matter, some historical formation of eastern Catholicism. Then there is the row of fundamental changes triggered off by the Reformation, which also raises the question of conflicts and distinctions among the Protestant churches, in addition to the Catholicism Vs Protestantism opposition.

Evidently, the Finnish Lutheran, British Anglican or German Calvinist churches (to mention randomly a few) are far away from each other in

historical dynamism, and each could only be comprehended in its complex relation to the given social structure. Regrettably, Bourdieu does not deal with the long-term transformation of social relations arising from the Reformation and wars of religion even in passing; nor does he allude to the enormous literature that has been created to illumine the correlations between the Protestant ethic, this-worldly asceticism, the inner differentiation of the church, inchoate capitalism, the institutions incorporating rational competition, and the historical variations of masculine domination. The name of Max Weber only crops up once in the book – in a wholly different context.

Even without an in-depth analysis, however, it can be contended that out of the four institutions mentioned by Bourdieu these are the Christian churches that would provide the best-grounded arguments to prove that – notwithstanding all their changes and inner differentiation – they have contributed most to the reproduction and maintenance of masculine domination in the long run. To put it more cautiously, out of the four institutions it is the church in which the stoutest resistance to the forces of women’s emancipation can be expected to this day. At the same time, it ought also to be considered in a complex analysis, besides the demonstrable decrease in the power of masculine domination in the churches in the long run, that under the conditions of secularising modernity it is the church of the four institutions whose social influences has decreased most with the passing of time.

Vision on History in Masculine Domination

The true object of a history of relations between the sexes is thus the history of the successive combinations (...) of structural mechanisms (such as those which ensure the reproduction of the sexual division of labour) and strategies which, through institutions and individual agents, have perpetuated the structure of relations of domination between the sexes, in the course of a very long history, and sometimes at the price of real or apparent changes (Bourdieu, 2001, pp. 83-84).

The question is whether Bourdieu's above statements can be accepted or not. It is possibly tenable that from pre-modern societies represented by Kabyle peasants through the Bloomsbury circle to the 21st century certain elements of masculine domination bridging ages, social groups and diverse economic conditions, can be discerned. Further, it can be a justifiable ambition for a researcher to try and consider forces that provide for the maintenance of relations of domination in addition to the exploration of the factors of transformation. The author of this paper is also inclined to accept that changes first take place in the upper social strata (but – precisely in view of Bourdieu's *Distinction* – it can be added that the norms, forms of taste and patterns of living that crystallize and become legitimate in the upper crust sooner or later ooze downward into the lower social strata as well). What is more, Bourdieu's theoretical statement that habitus is inseparable from the structure can be regarded of key significance, too, as it was mentioned earlier. That is to say, a study of social praxis and hexis can and should take into account gender(ed) habitus as well. However, it seems to be a problematic statement that gender specificities should enjoy extraordinary autonomy:

It is indeed astonishing to observe the extraordinary autonomy of sexual structures relative to economic structures, of modes of reproductions relative to modes of production. The same system of classificatory schemes is found, in its essential features, through the centuries and across economic and social differences, at the two extremes of the space of anthropological possibles, among the highland peasants of Kabylia and among the upper-class denizens of Bloomsbury (Bourdieu, 2001, p. 81).

This is not only logically indefensible (for if habitus is inseparable from the structure, then changes in the structure will inevitably entail changes in habitus). Bourdieu himself writes, that

dispositions (habitus) are inseparable from the structures (habitudines, in Leibniz' sense) that produce and reproduce them, in both men and women, and in particular from the whole structure of technical and ritual activities that is ultimately grounded in the structure of the market in symbolic goods (Bourdieu, 2001, p.42).

On the basis of this claim, it seems to be axiomatic that, conditioned by the transformation of the whole structure, gender(ed) habituses are also changing in the long run. The above quotation also contradicts Bourdieu’s practice of analysis: a whole row of the author’s excellent empirical works proves that changes in the macrostructure or the structure of the field are intertwined with the habitual changes of the agents (Bourdieu, 1984, 1992).

That is to say that Bourdieu uses a methodological trick at this point in order to be able to state that while economic and social structures change, gender(ed) structures determined by masculine domination are maintained or remain unaltered. The trick is that Bourdieu highlights changes in examining one type of social interdependencies and concentrates on permanence when looking at another type of social interdependencies. Or, the streaming river is compared to the riverside cliffs and not to another streaming river. Hence, it is justified to suspect that the argument is governed, not by the logic of empirical observations, but by the ambition to legitimate or illustrate certain preconceptions. If the subject is constructed in such a tricky manner, no scientific debate can be carried out about whether the “structure of the gap” between men and women is maintained or not by the end of the 20th century, because one can always find arguments torn from their complex historical context that may support the permanence of masculine domination, and others that support its changeability.

What Bourdieu practically does in *Masculine Domination* when he speaks of the “power of the structure” and the “symbolic negative coefficient” is paradigm expansion, for he applies his thesis crystallised in its most sophisticated form in his *Distinction* (1984) about the displacement of social structure. In this book he analyzes the interrelations between different social classes in a three-dimensional space: examining the quantity of capital possessed by the classes and class fractions; the structure of this capital (the rate of economic and cultural capitals, the re-conversion strategies between different types of capital); and the temporal changes of these two factors. In a sophisticated and witty critical analysis of the French society of the ‘50s and ‘70s he writes (à propos the displacement of schooling rates of 16-to 18-year-olds between 1954 and 1975):

Re-conversion strategies are nothing other than an aspect of the permanent actions and reactions whereby each group strives to

maintain or change its position in the social structure, or more precisely – at a stage in the evolution of class societies in which one can conserve only by changing – to change so as to conserve. Frequently the actions whereby each class (or class fraction) works to win new advantages, i.e., to gain an advantage over the other classes or so, objectively, to reshape the structure of objective relations between the classes (the relations revealed by the statistical distributions of properties), are compensated for (and so cancelled out ordinarily) by the reactions of the other classes, directed toward the same objective. In this particular (though very common) case, the outcome of these opposing actions, which cancel each other by the very countermovements, which they generate, is an overall displacement of the structure of the distribution, between the classes or class fractions, of the assets at stake in the competition. (...) Thus, by an apparent paradox, the maintenance of order, that is, the whole set of gaps, differences, differentials, ranks, precedents, priorities, exclusions, distinctions, ordinal properties, and thus of the relations of order which give a social formation its structure, is provided by an unceasing change in substantial (i.e., non-relational) properties. This implies that the social order established at any given moment is also necessarily a temporal order, an “order of successions”, as Leibniz put it, each group having as its past the group immediately below and for its future the group immediately above (Bourdieu 1984, p.157–163).

This lengthy quotation also illustrates the strategic specificity of Bourdieu’s paradigm-extension: in *Masculine Domination* all he does is to replace class by gender, and class habitus by gender(ed) habitus. When he discusses “the constancy of habitus”, “the negative symbolic coefficient by which women are separated from men”, the “permanence in and through change”, or the “strength of the structure”, he extends his theory about the displacement of the social structure to the displacement of the men/women relationship¹².

It is beyond this criticism to review Bourdieu’s reproduction theory in detail. Let’s merely note that while this theory is more or less adequate for the period between the last third of the 19th and the last third of the 20th centuries, it becomes problematic when it is applied to late-modern Western societies (and it is somewhat already problematic for the French society of

the 1960s—1970s). Should we accept that “the social order established at any given moment is also necessarily a temporal order, an order of successions, each group having as its past the group immediately below and for its future the group immediately above”, we would be at a loss viewing the radical transformations that have fundamentally restructured social relations in multicultural Western societies over the past few decades¹³.

Hence, contrary to Bourdieu’s claims, a consistent long-term social historical perspective would clearly reveal that, compared to earlier centuries the structurally conditioned social position of women had shifted towards emancipation in Europe; the female agent was gradually entering the stage of history, attaining a lot of the formulated demands: women defined by their motherhood became the protagonist of lots of 19th century disputes over population – both as agents and as subjects. All this can be interpreted as the increase in the relative power of the female agent. In France, for instance, threatened by Bismarck’s Germany, “depoulation” and “dénatalité” were considered to be a “social plague” and maternity became an object of many and contradictory comments” (Cova, 1991, p. 119). The basis for this moral panic was that “whereas France had been the most densely populated country in Europe, by 1918 it ranked fifth in population. Many ‘repopulators’ accused the feminists of being responsible for the declining birth-rate. The strategy of the feminist movement as a whole was to utilize that apparent demographic danger and the glorification of motherhood as a weapon in the struggle for the rights of mothers”. Maria Martin, the editor of *Journal des femmes*, wrote in 1896: “If you want children, learn to honour the mothers” (Cova, 1991, pp. 119-120).

Conclusion

After comparing the *Masculine Domination*’s two versions, and summing up the main claims of their critical reception, this paper intended to question the key statements of Pierre Bourdieu’s book, according to which the school, the family, the state and the church would reproduce, in the long run, masculine domination. It was argued that, with the exception of the church, the three other institutions had not maintained the permanence of masculine domination, but served the power balance between genders. It was also intended to identify the methodological trick of the Bourdieusian

vision on history, namely that, metaphorically speaking, he had compared the streaming river to the riverside cliffs. It was argued that while discussing “the constancy of habitus” and the “permanence in and through change”, or the “strength of the structure”, Bourdieu had extended his paradigm about the displacement of the social structure to the displacement of the men/women relationship.

When, in opposition to Bourdieu’s approach, the analysis of gender relations is put into the historical context of complex social interdependencies, the conclusion may be drawn that masculine domination is not of universal validity but its structural weight and character have fundamentally changed in the long run. Around the 17th century the forms of masculinities and the nature of masculine domination began to be subject to considerable change in Europe: the fighting, knightly masculinity based on the archaic libido dominandi was gradually replaced by a competitive, throughout psychologised, pacified masculinity which permeated both the public and the intimate spheres and which later ramified into further sub-variants.

Women’s emancipation in the West was closely connected to one of the most important specificities of modernity, the potential of the fulfilment of future-oriented change. The success of feminism and female emancipation was an eloquent proof of this potential. In the long run, the masculine habitual centre gradually shifted from a social practice governed by the drives of physical violence to the praxis of rivalry and symbolic violence. This process implied that men had to control their violent impulses, and to incorporate dispositional elements that were associated with women in previous millennia. In other words, honour-based masculinity was bridled and the hunting, duelling, sword wielding warrior (“noblesse d’épée”) gradually transformed into a courtier (“noblesse de robe”) (Elias, 2000; Nye, 1998). It is regrettable that this fundamental structural change was overlooked by Bourdieu, who, in his *Masculine Domination*, over-emphasized the importance of permanence and the symbolic aspect of violence.

Notes

¹ Seemingly a trivial matter, it might be also of importance: in the contents of the French edition, the post-scriptum is printed as if it were the last chapter of the third part. By

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contrast, the contents of the English version only include the three main parts without the subchapters. The lucidity of the argumentation is gravely marred thereby.

- ² As a sign of considerable self-restraint, Bourdieu omitted this passage from his book.
- ³ The author of this text agrees with the overwhelming majority of these critical comments. If not so, a note will be made.
- ⁴ This critique seems to be an overstatement because Bourdieu, in his best (referred to above), is capable of producing sophisticated empirical analyses that surpass schematic hyperfunctionalism.
- ⁵ Unlike Fowler, the author of this article thinks that although Bourdieu’s theory of praxis does try to shun the trap of determinism, it defines less the (self)reflexivity of the agents as its main means but rather, stresses partly the freedom of (limited) improvisation ensured by habitus and partly the importance of the translational reproduction of the social structure.
- ⁶ The term „school” are used on 10 pages according to the index of the French edition (Bourdieu 1998, p. 137). These quotations are significantly longer than those referring to the other three institutions. (The “education”-concept is missing from the index.)
- ⁷ There are two more sentences (!) in the book concerning the family (in association with an article published in *American Psychologist* in 1977, entitled “Changes in Family Roles, Socialization, and Sex Differences”), but, interestingly, these sentences concern changes not permanence in the family (Bourdieu, 2001, p. 89).
- ⁸ He ignores even his earlier research: although he devoted a long article to changes in family structures (Bourdieu, 1993b), but, interestingly, he does not take it into account in this book.
- ⁹ To use Giddens’ term: sexuality is gaining plasticity:
Plastic sexuality is decentred sexuality, freed from the needs of reproduction... can be moulded as a trait of personality and thus is intrinsically bound up with the self. At the same time – in principle – it frees sexuality from the rule of the phallus, from the overweening importance of male sexual experience.” (Giddens 1992, p. 2). Giddens sets the new “emotional order” in the focus of attention which had a crucial role in the equalization of power relations between men and women in Western Modernity. He wishes to grasp this emotional order using three key concepts: “pure relationship”, “plastic sexuality”, and “the ethos of romantic love”. Pure relationship designates a “relationship of sexual and emotional equality” (Giddens 1992, p. 2), plastic sexuality means a “decentred sexuality, freed from the needs of reproduction” and “from the rule of the phallus”, the ethos of romantic love, the harbinger of the pure relationship, “presumes that a durable emotional tie can be established with the other on the basis of qualities intrinsic to that tie itself”. According to Giddens, although this ethos helps “to put women ‘in their place’ – the home”, its emergence “can be seen as an active, and radical, engagement with the ‘maleness’ of modern society (Giddens, 1992).
- ¹⁰ In French: „, inculque (ou inculquait) explicitement une morale familialiste”. This bracket unveils that the present and the past are intermixed, i.e. the kernel of the matter, historicity is not taken into account.
- ¹¹ One discusses the “expiatory ethos” of the Spanish church, the second is a study of French female mystics, and the third embarks on the representation of women in 16th century ecclesiastic art. From the latter he gives a citation in a footnote, which contains the far from surprising statement that the 16th century clerical books and sermons were written by men, and not by women.

- ¹² One could go back even to earlier times and find that his thesis put forth in *Distinction* was already formulated from the beginning of his career. Significantly, in “La sociologie de l’ Algérie”, which is Bourdieu’s first book written in 1958, there is a chapter entitled “La permanence par le changement” [Permanence by change].
- ¹³ If the thesis of the overall displacement of the social structure would be extended from a national to an international context, it could be argued that the structural gap between genders is being reproduced as part of the Global North / Global South-divide (Hochschild & Ehrenreich, 2004). Bourdieu ignores this international dimension in this book.

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