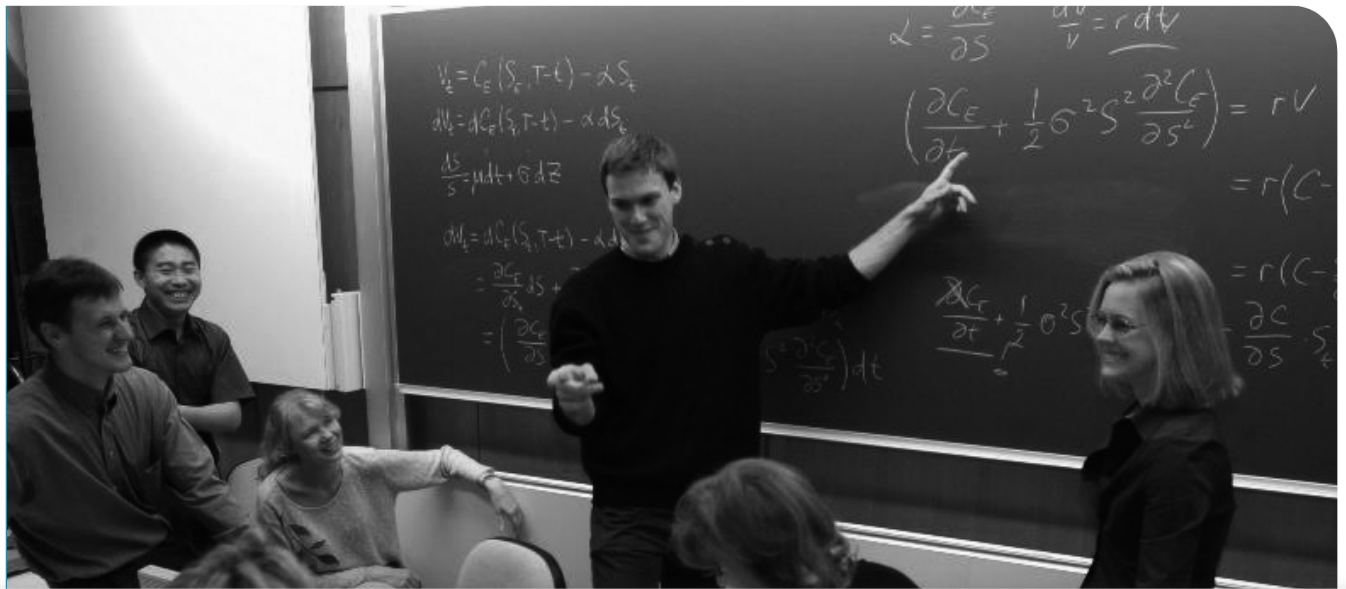# Sociological theories and inequalities in access to higher education (HE)
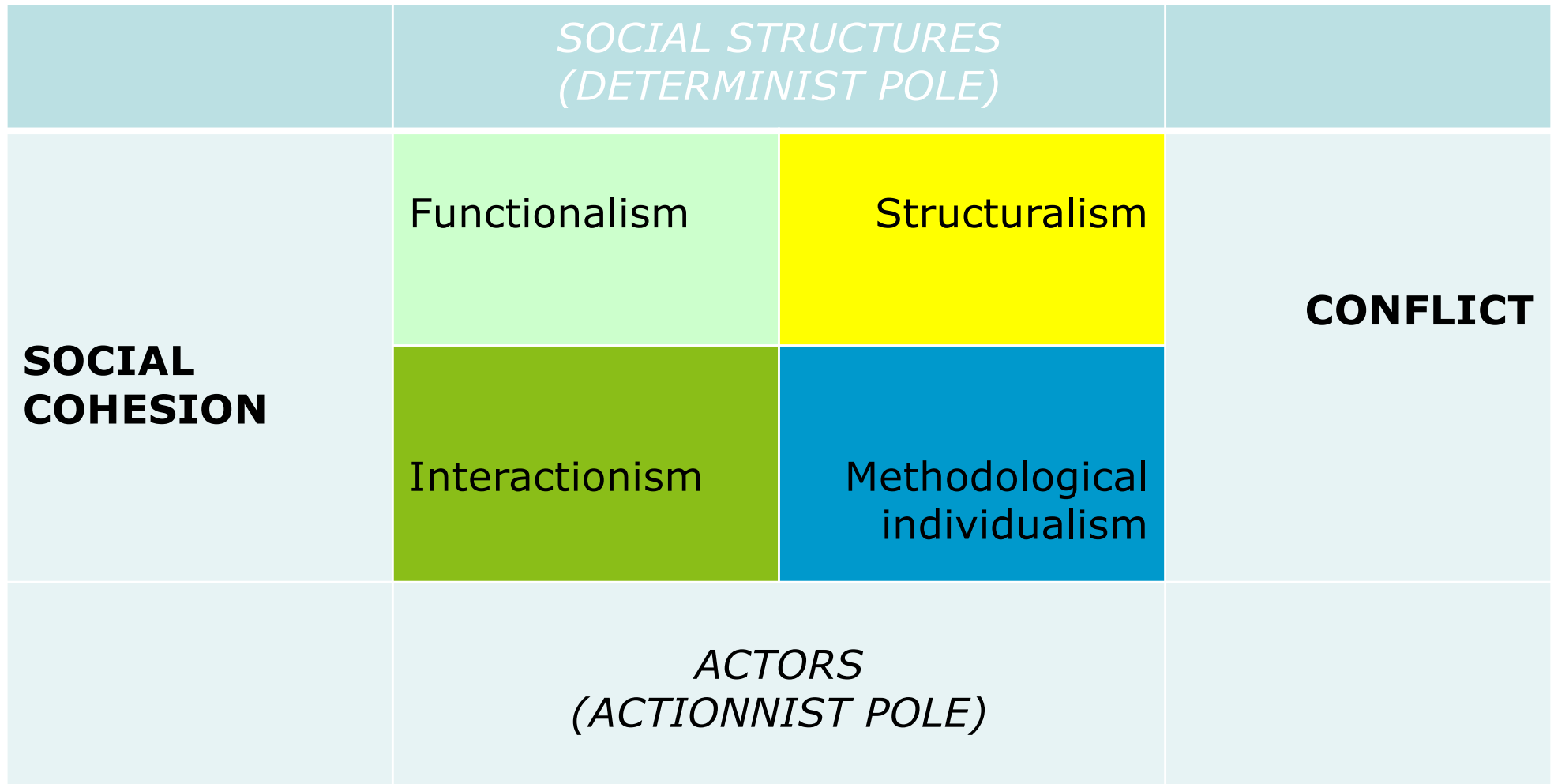## G. Goastellec

VII International Summer School on Higher Education Research
"Theoretical and Conceptual Perspectives in Higher Education Research"
May 31 – June 6, 2019, St. Petersburg

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| le savoir vivant |

Let's start with a little discussion:

When you think about unequal access to HE, what are the first explanations that come to mind ?

General introduction

	SOCIAL STRUCTURES (DETERMINIST POLE)		
SOCIAL COHESION	Functionalism	Structuralism	**CONFLICT**
	Interactionism	Methodological individualism	
	ACTORS (ACTIONNIST POLE)		

Structures / Individuals

2 main paradigms considering either:

1. Social processes as:
   - « walking by their own means », their own nature and laws,
   - driving people who are submitted to those;

OR

2. Social processes as the « complicated result of human beings »

→ Inequalities
   - embedded in the structures or resulting from individuals' behaviour
   - a threat to social cohesion or an expression of social conflicts

In connection with the access issue (1)

Access to HE: a long history…

1. A governance instrument of social organisations
    – Social stratification : who accesses what and for which outcomes ?
    – Territorialisation of politics
        • Producing an administration… and more
        • Geographical selection of who has access…
        • Citizenship categorization

    Over time:
    – From elite to mass
    – From assumed inequalities (reproducing the structure) to equity in access as a desirable goal

Elites' circulation: an old story

Plato: there are "natural" talents distributed randomly across society; we need to voluntarily implement a way to identify them.

The guardians of the city must come from all social classes and be removed from the influence of their family when they are 10 years old in order to be educated by professors and prepared to govern the state.

Pareto: « Elites' circulation »
Binary vision of society, structured by whether or not one belongs to the elite.

« Aristocracies do not last (…) History is a graveyard of aristocracies (…) They decay not in numbers only. They decay also in quality (…)The governing class is restored not only in numbers, but . . . in quality, by families rising from the lower classes and bringing with them the vigor and the proportions of residues necessary for keeping themselves in power. . . . Potent cause of disturbance in the equilibrium is the accumulation of superior elements in the lower classes and, conversely, of inferior elements in the higher classes. (Pareto, 1968)
→ *(Higher) education: at the center of this issue*

A model of meritocratic society

Level of education (E)

−   +

Social Origin (O)   −   Social Position (D)
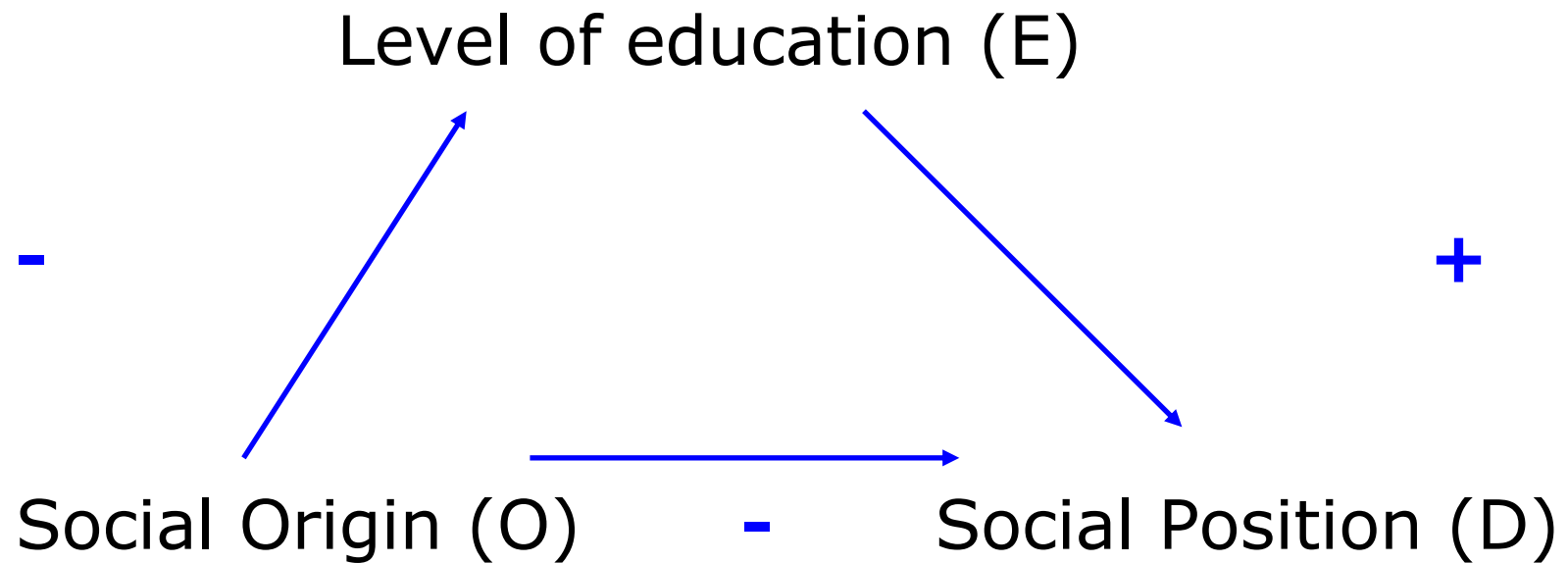
Blau, Peter et Otis Duncan. 1967. *The American Occupational Structure*. New York: Wiley.

Theories of social mobility

Modernisation theory (liberal thesis):

development of industrialisation → societies become more democratic → have higher social mobility rates (Clark Kerr & all,1960)

social success: not related to ascriptive characteristics but acquired ones (degrees)

Proletarisation theory (Marxist thesis): social mobility through decrease of independent workers and increase of wage earners (contractualisation of exploitation) –

Invariance theory (Sorokin thesis) : no consistent trend toward heightening or flattering of social structure but ceaseless fluctuation

Realities of social origin effect on access to HE and degrees: contrasted results

- **Reduction of inequalities** (Boudon, 1973, Ganzeboom et Nueuwbeerta, 1999, Breen et al. 2009, Ballarino et al., 2009),

- **Persistence of inequalities** (Blossfeld et Shavit, 1993, Raftery et Hout, 1993, Pfeffer, 2008).

✧ Results vary depending on the statistical tools used, countries and periods of time.

➢ **Large research**: Arum, Gamoran et Shavit (2007) 15 countries comparison:

- HE more inclusive since 2nd world war

- Increased number of people getting HE education

- But identical effect of social origin

- Diversity of access opportunities depending on sectors, institutions, disciplines…

- Triple process of **inclusion, persistence, and diversion**: inequalities are recomposed between social groups

In Europe, over the 2nd half of 20th century:

- inequalities reduction: 1950-1970 + countries come closer

- 1990's: increased inequalities,

- 2000's: increase of inter-country differences. (Koucký, Zelenka et Bartušek,2017)

- Socio-economic inequalities remain very important (minimum: odds = 3-4)

- Ethnic inequality reversed: "foreign" attributes from an advantage to a disadvantage (Goastellec, forthcoming)

- Gender inequality reversed as well

In connection with the access issue (2)

2. An instrument of individual action / strategy /destiny

- Differently accessible and used depending on social characteristics:
  - Gender
  - Socio-economic
  - Ethnic/religious/linguistic
  - Rural/urban

- How can the various sociological paradigms help digging into the issue of inequalities in access?

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Diving into the paradigms

4 classical strands:

1. Functionalism
2. Structuralism
3. Methodological individualism
4. Interactionism

→ **a few theoretical pluridisciplinary developments**

→ How might you use those to question your own research?

1. Functionalism:

- What is at stake? Society's survival – social cohesion

- Inequalities in access: society's survival – reproduction : Some degree of inequality is inescapable

  - The most ambitious positions attract the most "talented" : education requires time and money

- Socialisation - central concept - process through which individuals are prepared to play their role by integration norms and rules

HE: interdependent with other societal institutions (economy, politics, religion, etc.)

→ What is the function served by HE / by access inequalities in different societies? **Alternatively**: What do Affirmative Action policies account for ? (ex: sustaining Dalit access in India)?

   Reducing social reproduction ? Increasing social cohesion?

Talcott Parsons: 1959, The school as a social system, *Harvard Education Review*, 29, 297-318

- **Classroom** :
  - Place of socialisation
  - Place of allocation of labour : access to HE as a fracture line between socioprofessional status and thus incomes

- **What happens in the classroom between those who will attend HE and those who won't?**
  - Tracking based on results
  - Selection process influenced by both inherited and acquired factors
  - Large reinforcement of inherited status: especially when social origins and academic results do not coincide

  → *When the various functions of HE are not addressed in a proper way, the system is ready for a change*

2. Structuralism / conflict theories :

- HE is not ideologically neutral (≠ functionalism)

- Social tension created by rival interests between individuals and social groups

- Inequality is based on people's position in the social system and not on merit

- HE favors some students

- Change is inevitable (conflict of interests) and desirable

- Schools teaches students an ideology that serves the rich, provides students with «false consciousness»: interiorisation of the meritocracy myth.

- **Marx**: Education as an ideological control from dominant groups : reproducing the division of labour, allowing some groups to appropriate resources and take control of organisations

- **Bowles et Gintis**: Marxist perspective

Schools reproduce the economic structure by offering more opportunities to the students from the most advantaged backgrounds

+ student socialisation to power and domination hierarchies – legitimation through meritocratic ideal

→ symbolic violence

H: those who dominate the capitalist system also control other societal institutions, including education

→ Inequalities express the education's role in the perpetuation of the capitalist system

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James Coleman: Social Capital

Pierre Bourdieu: Cultural capital, symbolic violence, habitus

Basile Bernstein: Restricted and elaborated codes, social division of work

Inequalities in access are reproduced through school expectations, a proximity to the culture of the bourgeoisie, and a hidden curriculum…

	Functionalism	**Marxism**
Work	Education: selects individuals for different jobs in society	Makes sure students from favoured and powerful families access the best jobs
Ideas	Offers values and morality to people	Prepares students to accept a conformist and passive vision of the world so that the poorest can be exploited
Socialisation	Individuals are prepared for skills useful for their future lives	Students learn not to question authority and are offered an education that limits them in terms of specific roles on the job market
Curriculum	They receive the curriculum needed to play their roles in society	Curriculum made for the needs of those who control the power, and that reflects their ideological beliefs
Social Mobility	Education: offers the most capable ones an ascending road in society	Education aims to maintain most people in their social position

Theoretical developments

Paolo Freire: the political dimension of education - the political, economic, and cultural contexts of oppression make awareness central to reducing educational inequalities (activist learning, activist learners)

Resistance theory: professors and students as active participants – who do not always conform to expectations leading to social reproduction

Feminist perspectives: socialisation as producing women (De Beauvoir, 1949)

Intersectionality (Kimberley Crenshaw, Audre Lorde, Lili Kim…)
→ Question HE curriculum, pedagogy, recognition of various culture as instruments of inclusion

And what about the role of students and families in producing access inequalities to HE?

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3. Methodological individualism:

Boudon: social facts are not to be explained by other social facts but by the sum of individuals' actions

➢ Inequalities are the consequence of the sum of individual decisions/individual strategies → schools are neutral

How does one decide to attend HE or not?

Individuals are rational and thus understandable

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- **Educational trajectories: bifurcations points (options, tracks, etc.)**

At each bifurcation point:

- Strategies indexed on social origin
- Average level of academic results : strong influence of social origin
- Cost-benefit calculation

- Choices based on:
  - Academic results
  - Targeted social status
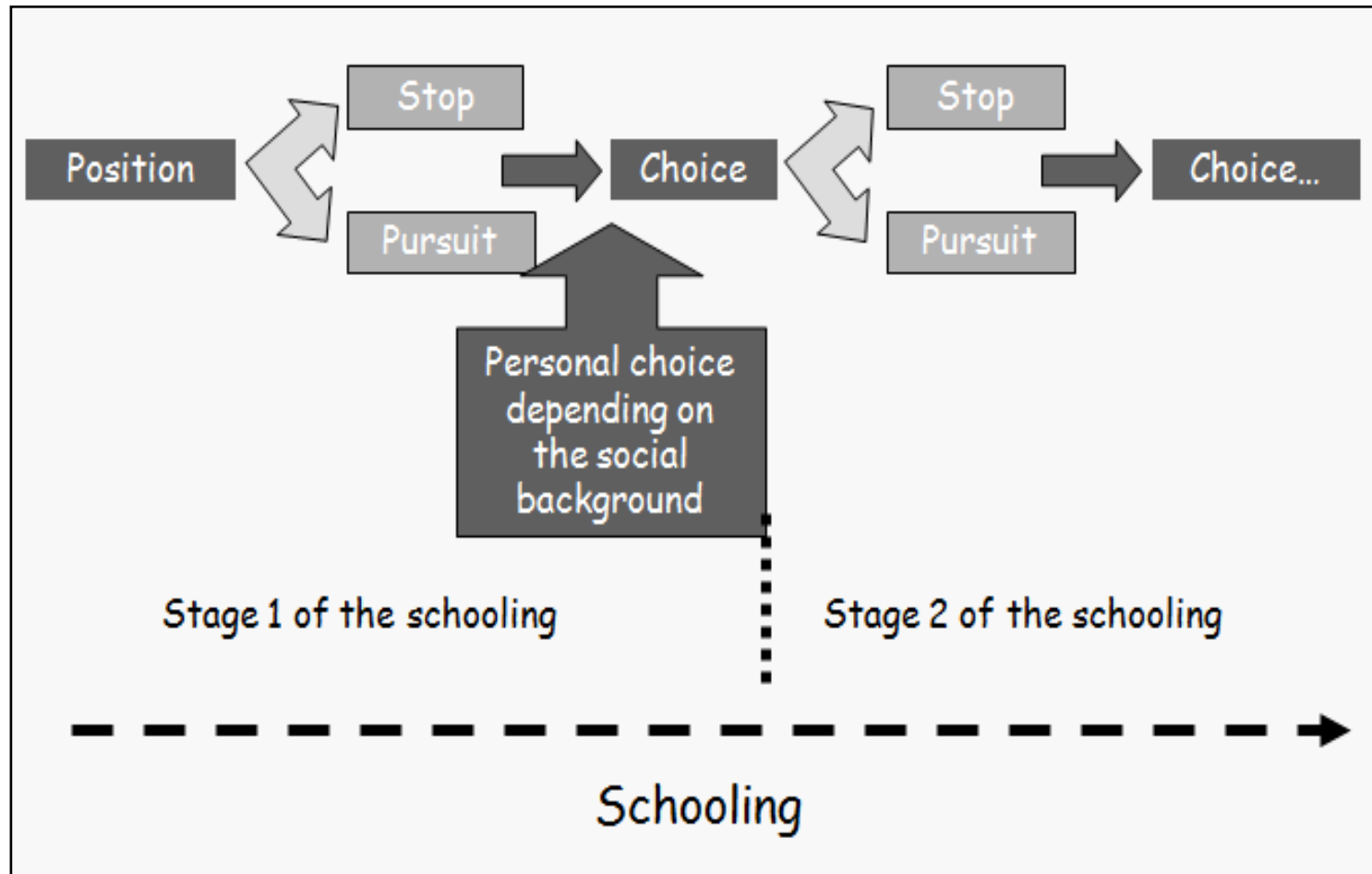 - Subjective evaluation of risks and costs

  2 main factors:
  - Institutional: educational choices available in the system
  - Psychosociological: family's social position

To sum up:
Structuralism (Bourdieu)
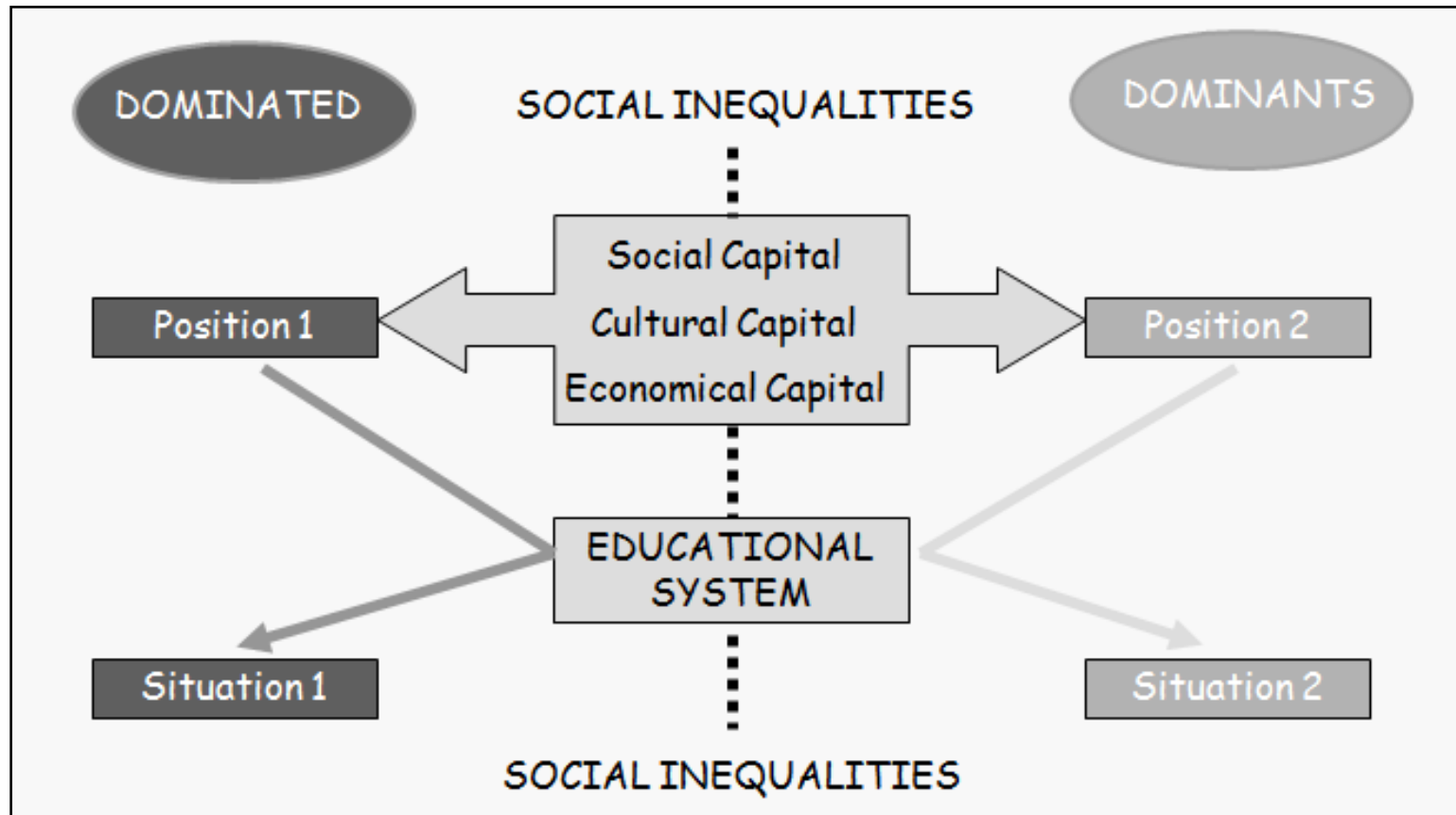
Rational Choice (Boudon)

The importance of keeping an opened paradigmatic approach

Research comparing the explanative power of these 2 paradigms to analyse inequalities in access to HE and degrees show e.g. that in the contemporary French context:

- accessing HE is better explained by the rational choice theory,

- while pursuing a Master's or doctoral studies are better explained by the structuralist approach…. (Jaoul-Grammare, 2010)

4. Interactionism:

How does one become affiliated as a student, learn the student job /to be a student? What's going on in classrooms that explains access inequalities?

- Focus on symbolic interactions and processes within schools

- Meaning of education

- Students learn their differences through symbolic interactions

$\rightarrow$ Labelling theory

- **Student job and academic success**

  – Degree of interiorisation of implicit elements (concrete modalities of academic success and failure)
  – Competent student: the one which answers explicit and implicit requirements

  Ex: The work of being a student (A. Coulon, 1998)

  Q: What are the mechanisms through which the university's selection processes and social rankings distinguish those who are excluded from those who remain students?

  → The passing: strangeness, learning, affiliation
  → Key to success: « affiliation » - incorporation of the HE practices and operations. To master the rules to overcome them.

- **The student job** : to affiliate oneself

  – Learning how to be a student by manipulating the rules

  – Decoding the routines of academic discourses and reasoning as well as ranking ones

  – Transforming institutional and intellectual rules into practical actions

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In sum: importance of a comprehensive analysis:

HE : interdependency with other society' institutions

Between Structures and individual's strategies
-   Education's structure and organisation before HE and within HE

Share of students in the different paths / levels

- Maximally Maintained inequalities: (Raftery & Hout, 1993), inequalities between 2 groups in accessing a certain level of education persist until the initially advantaged group reaches a saturation point.
- Effectively Maintained Inequality (Lucas, 2001)) socioeconomically advantaged actors secure their advantages in education

→ Bringing together these various levels of analysis

5. In between disciplines and levels of analysis…..

Amartya Sen: Capabilities
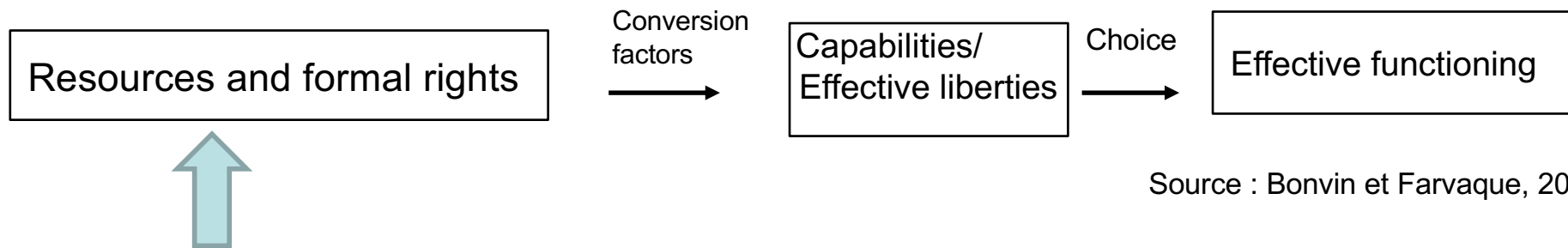
Source : Bonvin et Farvaque, 2007

Resources : financial, material, informational

Formal Rights : expected degrees

Conversion factors: what allows the student to access resources and actualise his rights

→ 3 types of factors: **personal** (academic characteristics; health, etc), **social** (family's social, cultural, and ethnic characteristics, gender), and **environmental** (organisational/policies, geographical)

Capabilities or effective freedom: real possibilities of participation.

→ the social responsibility attributed to a student goes hand in hand with the collective responsibility to extend its frame of possibilities

- Focus: possibility to opt for HE studies which the student values

Choices: what are the possible choices available, with regard to the structure of the school system, academic and social selection, professional and educational strategies… ?

Effective functioning: HE accessed by whom and how?

«Access is more than an individual project, shaped both by objective conditions and subjective biographies, that is by general conversion factors and a person's social and personal options. Key conversion factors are **material** (income) and **social** (family, community, school, information), which produce an **interlocking system of opportunity**. Access thus requires more than formal opportunity to enable social mobility for all.» (Walker, 2019)

Theorising macro structure interdependencies

Societal approach (Maurice, Sellier, Sylvestre, 1982):

training system : dimension of wage relations which is the dominant social relation

- – Access to HE and degrees determined by the social space where they take place

- – Structural independencies within each society – central + economic regulations
  - Reduction of social inequalities + increased economic security: reduction of educational inequalities (Shavit and Blossfeld)

- **Production Regimes** (Hall, Soskice, 2002)

Institutional arrangements behind levels of inequalities in access to HE:

- – Coordinated Market economies: apprenticeship at the center of education system – high inequalities in HE
- – Liberal Market Economy : coordination through market mechanisms and hierarchies – general education – intersectorial mobility

- **Varieties of Capitalism** (Hall, Soskice, 2001)

- – Focus on complementarity of institution's education and produced competences with socio-economic institutions' organisation
- – Studied through analysis of relations between actors

+ **Partisan politics** : effect of socio-economic coalitions on the structure of education systems (Busemeyer, 2015)
- – Importance to identify the different stages of education policies: path initialisation, formation, consolidation

Neo-institutionalism

- Meyer and Rowan (1977), DiMaggio and Powell (1983)

- **Explaining**:
  - Increased homogeneity in organisations /repetitive character
  - Influences of institutional environments on organisations

- **Access**:
  - By which processes do HEIs around the world :
    - Problematise access inequalities as an issue to be addressed ?
    - Use similar admission processes (national tests, affirmative action) ?

Neo-institutionalism

- **Institutions**:
  - Operate in an environment containing other institutions
    - HEI's observe each other to position themselves... copy, adapt...
    - Universities interact with economic, political, cultural, and other social subsystems

    → Are influenced by a wider environment

  - Change as a result of global trends and policies

  - Influence individual behaviour:
    - Incentives to maximise their benefits (rational choice theory)

    Ex: admission officers might support access to students from economic elites as they are aware that it helps raise money for their university

    - Cognitive influence: people act depending on convictions/norms/values

    Equity? Merit? Etc...

    Focal on legitimacy: acquired by conforming to norms, beliefs and rules

Neo-institutionalism

Focal on legitimacy: acquired by conforming to norms, beliefs and rules

- **Ex**: social belonging categories used in admission systems:

- in France, ethnic categories are forbidden to use. Admission officers generally estimate it illegitimate to use as a criteria in admission processes

Neo-institutionalism

Isomorphism :

3 types of institutional pressures (Scott, 1995), through which institutions diffuse (homogenization):

- **Coercive**: legal or politic - in France, the State Law on Universities stipulated that Universities have no right to select their students

- **Normative**: (ex: collective conventions) : professional norms making for constraining cognitive frame. Norms that orient actors behavior and decision making.

- **Mimetic** : competition pressure for institutions to adapt their practices to their most performing competitors.

Neo-Institutionalism

- **Education**:
  - key producer of social cohesion : supply the shared beliefs that generate shared cultural meanings
  - one of only a handful of key social institutions (next to family, economy, religion, government, science)

- **HE**:
  - takes place in this nexus of institutions
  - explains its size and strategic importance: crucial case of institutional diffusion, a focus of new institutionalism
  - from training institution's elites to preparing masses for industry and professions…

HE across the globe:

- exhibits considerable isomorphism

- but also differs greatly between countries and cultures

World Polity Theory

- **John Meyer & al.**

- **World polity**: political structures, associations, and cultures in the international sphere

- **Focal**: societies became more similar in terms of government and state policies

- **Isomorphism**: account for a world in which societies are structurally similar in a plurality of unexpected dimensions and transform into similar unexpected dimensions

- ✧ From the hypothesis of divergence to the hypothesis of convergence of politics

World Polity Theory

- **Education**: shows that massification or inequalities does not covary with the country's level of economic development

- **Leads to a culturalist approach of world polity** : worldwide cultural models: development of education in a country, its goals, structures, school curriculum, and methods would correspond more to global models than to the national context's economic and political characteristics

- Cultural unity of the world society in terms of cultural standards (normative and cognitive) or institutions having acquired a global authority

- Those standards are attractive or compulsory for a large number of actors

To conclude:
Different theories to grasp multiple context /processes / causes / meanings of inequality

- **Scales of analysis**

  - Trajectories

  - Educational systems structure inequalities in HE: product of the overall school system organisation

  - Stratification – division of work – articulation of HE with other institutions

- **Frame of reference and its implementation**

  - Global diffusion of equality principle / diversity representation in HE
  - National / institutional HE policies (contextual translation)

  Same level of inequalities: different processes depending on time and place (+ multicausality)

  Various levels of inequalities express different HE function as well as specific national social contracts

→ an advocacy for

      comprehensive pictures

      hard theories to analyse hard facts!

→ Be curious… get out of your comfort zone, be creative!

Thanks!

Gaele.Goastellec@unil.ch

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