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Bourdieu on Education and Social and Cultural Reproduction

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ABSTRACT *Bourdieu's work has attracted considerable interest and, notwithstanding criticism of his style and obscure theoretical formulations, has introduced some powerful concepts into social theory. This paper examines Bourdieu's contribution to the sociology of education and especially his account of socially differentiated educational attainment. Particular attention is given to issues of structure, agency and habitus, the cultural autonomy of the school, arbitrary and necessary school cultures, and the distinction between primary and secondary effects on educational differences. Some specific criticisms, for example Elster's charge of a double account of domination, are also addressed. Bourdieu's concentration on habitus as the most significant generator of practice is held to be a theory of socialisation and the paper examines the nature of the explanation of social practice provided by such theories. The argument concludes with a plea for critical tolerance with respect to Bourdieu's work but with a suggestion that his account of socially differentiated educational attainment in terms of habitus is finally inadequate.*

Bourdieu's theory of social and cultural reproduction has attracted great attention from sociologists in the English-speaking world since the first translations of his work appeared in the early 1970s. His anthropologically and historically informed approach to the study of social and cultural reproduction has brought a new sense of coherence to the sociology of education. Yet although Bourdieuan concepts introduced for the study of the mode of production; the cultural arbitrary, cultural capital, cultural inheritance, *habitus*, symbolic violence, strategies of reproduction and class trajectories, are increasingly evident in the discourse of the sociology of education these concepts are not invariably articulated within the full and complex theoretical position developed by their French author, indeed they are frequently misunderstood, and this paper will attempt to offer a contextually critical discussion of the Bourdieuan theory of practice with close reference to the sociology of education.

It is a commonplace of materialist social theory that human societies must be studied as systems of economic and cultural production (Bunge, 1979). The

marxian concept of mode of production, privileging economic capital, has informed the study of such systems in countless investigations. Bourdieu's concept of mode of reproduction, privileging symbolic capital, is intended to provide no less a powerful means of investigating systems of cultural reproduction. Societies, and social groups within societies, must reproduce as well as produce, in fact, it might be said that they produce in order to reproduce; and in order to manage the regulated inter-generational transmission of real and symbolic capital societies must necessarily develop appropriate structures which enable successful cultural reproduction. Structural anthropology saw these structures, of course, as residing in some supra-individual social property which (through mechanisms never satisfactorily clarified) ordered the actions of individuals. Bourdieu's interest is in cultural capital and its transmission, but it should not be imagined that he is blind to the importance of economic capital. On the contrary, Bourdieu (1986b, p. 253) specifically criticises structuralism and ethnomethodology for ignoring "the brutal fact of universal reducibility to economics." Cultural capital, he notes, can exist in three forms, embodied as a disposition of the mind and body; objectified as cultural goods, and in its institutionalised state as, for example, educational qualifications. In addition to cultural capital Bourdieu also recognises social capital as "the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to the possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalised relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition" (ibid., p. 248). Social capital, the integration within a network of social connections which can be mobilised for particular purposes, is clearly recognised as a distinctive resource together with financial capital and cultural capital.

The concept of capital applied to such resources enables Bourdieu to explore a potent property of capital, its property of conversion and reconversion. We understand that economic capital may be switched readily from one form to another in the search for profitable investment; land converted to shares, shares converted to buildings, buildings converted to annuities, and so on. By a similar process, Bourdieu suggests, only semi-metaphorically, all forms of capital are subject to conversion, real capital to cultural capital, cultural capital to social capital, and so on. In Bourdieu's economy of cultural practice societies and social groups are understood to be engaged strategically in a continual competition for real and symbolic profit for the benefit of present and future generations.

With this integrated and productive conceptual framework Bourdieu is able to investigate cultural transmission as a strategic process of family based inter-generational reproduction. Social groups are understood to possess bundles of real and symbolic resources and to pursue active strategies to facilitate the inter-generational transmission of physical and symbolic property. The relevance of this for the sociology of education is obvious: in modern societies the school has become the most important agency for the reproduction of almost all social classes. This insight early enabled Bourdieu (1974) to challenge the optimistic liberal perception of the school as an instrument of social reform and equality, and it has taken him to ever more refined analyses of the creation and recreation of the difference.

Structure, Agency and *Habitus*

Habitus in Bourdieu's work refers to a system of embodied dispositions which

generate practice in accordance with the structural principles of the social world. Bourdieu's structuralist approach to the study of culture, his anthropology, captures in the concept of *habitus* the formal and informal mores, customs, or rules of a society and the unelaborated relations of homology which give access to another level of order and meaning. The continual cultural cycle—produced culture, internalisation through socialisation, cultural production—is not one of eternally closed and determined reproduction because at the moment analysed as structured culture *habitus* is conceived as a grammar making possible the generation of new forms of expression which may alter the structure of the grammar itself (much as speech made possible by grammar itself transforms grammar) and this provides the theoretical space for cultural change. The complex concept of 'culture' is for Bourdieu, a system of meaning organised by some generative principle and the theory of practice has as its object the explanation of social and cultural practices in terms of these objective structures.

Although fundamentally structuralist in this sense Bourdieu is always concerned to distance his theory from classical structuralism which he regards as determinist in its unmediated and unexplained movement from structure to practice. The theory of practice begins with structure rather than action (indeed the concept of action has no place in Bourdieu's theory) but Bourdieu is open to criticism for failing to maintain a coherent and unified concept of structure. He refers, for example, to such "objective structures" as price curves, chances of access to higher education, laws of the matrimonial market, social relations (employer–worker, husband–wife), which might be thought a heterogeneous collection of "structures", to say the least (Layder, 1981). But structures are essential to Bourdieu for it is in terms of "objective structure" that sociological explanations of social practices are framed. From this concept of structure, therefore, Bourdieu moves to the actual practices of the social group which accompany the identified structures. But how does a structural property, a rule of class endogamy, for example, actually bring about the practice of forming marriage alliances mainly between members of the same social class? It seems to Bourdieu that without an effective mediating agency such a theory, which has the form sociological explanations must necessarily take in explaining social practice in terms of social structures, is determinist. His solution is to introduce the concept of "*habitus*" by which the effective casual structures mediate, since they make possible practice, between social cause and social effect.

A social theory may, for example, explain established cultural practices of aggressive male socialisation in terms of the structural conditions of political instability. In these conditions the only way for such a society to reproduce itself successfully is through the aggressive defence of its territory which demands the production of warriors appropriately socialised into a culture of warfare. But such structuralist accounts appear to leave people themselves the pawns of structure as if they were not active and self-determining agents. A full account, Bourdieu suggests, should say that the structure of political instability is internalised as a set of dispositions, the *habitus*, which then generates practices of an appropriate kind. The fundamental aim of Bourdieu's culturalism is to disclose the structure of principles from which agents produce regulated practices, for that structure of principles is the real character of culture itself. The *habitus* is thus a system of durable dispositions inculcated by objective structural conditions, but since it is embodied the *habitus* gains a history and generates its practices for

some time even when the objective conditions which gave rise to it have disappeared. The internalised principles of the *habitus* are the principles which structure the culture. In this sense *habitus* is internalised structure and the physical embodiment of objective structure. As with two sides of a coin, the *habitus* is structured by principles of the structure, as a code, and practices are structured by the principles of the *habitus*. We can say that members of a social group come to acquire as a result of their socialisation a set of dispositions which reflect central structural elements (political instability, kinship rules, and so on) and therefore behave in ways which reproduce those structural elements.

Because the *habitus* mediates between structural principles as a property of the culture and structural principles as a property of practice and is itself a structured embodiment of those principles the concept of *habitus* has a threefold reference to Bourdieu's work. It is possible to refer to "collective *habitus*" (the unifying cultural code), "dispositional *habitus*" (the internalised cultural code) and "manifest *habitus*" (the practice of a characteristic style). This multiple reference does a great deal to effect the mediation of agency and structure. The *habitus* is also the location of strategic practices. In Bourdieu's accounts it is not agents, individuals or social organisations, that carry out strategic plans but the *habitus*—the embodied objectification of structure. But then Bourdieu often fudges in this area with an appeal to metaphor, "everything happens as if", he will say, so that we are left uncertain whether what is offered is a just so story or an actual account of causal mechanisms.

Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* is the essential core of what should properly be regarded as a theory of socialisation, but a rather limited one. Despite its apparent complexity the theory allows no recognition of self, or choice or action. Working at the level of structure and practice Bourdieu recognises the strategic behaviour of groups but not individuals. Although Bourdieu admits that *habitus* is not the only principle generating cultural practice and occasionally refers to his "theory of practice and action" his interest is almost exclusively on how the taken-for-granted practice of socialised individuals is effective in realising the strategic ends of their cultural group. Since it is a theory of practice rather than a theory of action (although Bourdieu argues that the theory of practice is a theory of action) there is no adequate discussion of the nature of agents and the self in his work. Bourdieu wants to show how the taken-for-granted behaviour of a culture brings about the same result as strategic calculation because the estimation of the objective chances of a group are built into its cultural habits. He thus often distinguishes the responses of the *habitus's* (habitual, "automatic", taken-for-granted) bodily responses and an individual's strategic, deliberate, rational, calculation. Bourdieu, in fact, even suggests that people are only rational when they step out of the automatic responses prompted by their *habitus* (the obscure, deep-rooted choices of the *habitus*); the problem, however, is that nothing within the theory really enables them to do this.

Bourdieu's intention is to synthesise theoretical accounts of the social world which either emphasise both or neglect structure or agency. Seeking to avoid the structuralist determinism and phenomenological individualism Bourdieu attempts to construct a new theory of practice in which the sterile opposition of the old debates (conscious/unconscious, explanation by cause/explanation by reason, mechanical submission to social constraint/rational and strategic calculation, individual/society, and so on) can be transcended. With his concept of *habitus* as

an internalised mechanism which produces practice automatically in accordance with the cultural code of a society Bourdieu announces his solution.

The Cultural Autonomy of the School

One of Bourdieu's best known theses is of the school as a conservative force. This has, however, given rise to a misconception for Bourdieu does not, in fact, argue that the school is merely a passive instrument for the reproduction of family acquired *habitus* which "objectively" certifies the dominant cultural code of society. Bourdieu's investigation of the connection between the school and systems of thought situates the school, in non-traditional societies, as the central generative site of the distinctive *habitus* of the culture, thus Bourdieu (1971, pp. 192–193) writes, "it may be assumed that every individual owes to the type of schooling he has received a set of basic, deeply interiorised master patterns". Thus in this theory, schooling does have its own power to shape consciousness, over and above the power of the family, and it is clear that the role of the school is acknowledged as active, and not merely passive in its "legitimation" of family acquired *habitus*. In a noteworthy passage, an example of the richly detailed ethnographic description that forms an essential component of his methodology and the immediate origin of the concept of *habitus*, Bourdieu describes the relationship of homology, that is the "fitness" or "family likeness", between the forms of medieval scholasticism as a philosophy and the forms of Gothic art and architecture, in order to illustrate how the connections he posits at the deep level of *habitus* as generative structure are realised in the productions of the culture. Again, the style of the *leçon*—the French school form for dissertations—is similarly argued to be a product of school generated forms that must be interiorised and "lived" by successful students. It is not difficult for Bourdieu to demonstrate how a stress on the strictly arbitrary elements of class style and personal presentation serves the purposes of working class exclusion and elite reproduction. Bourdieu's theory does, therefore, and contrary to the views of certain critics, recognise the school as the productive locus of a particular *habitus* which gives rise to, as he says, "patterns of thought which organise reality by directing and organising thinking about reality and makes what he thinks thinkable for him as such and in the particular form in which it is thought" (*ibid.*, pp. 194–195).

Arbitrary and Necessary Cultures of the School

To anthropologists all cultural practices are arbitrary. Whether a society practices monogamy or polygamy is a matter of indifference, for both customary practices are equally possible and equally human. In this sense the content of a culture and so the curriculum of the school which is but a sampling of the culture may be regarded as arbitrary. If the cultural arbitrary of the school is not the cultural arbitrary of the students, or a section of its students, then the effectiveness of the school as an agent of cultural transmission will be weakened greatly. Thus, if the culture of the school is essentially middle-class then it may be expected that working class students will find themselves in a culturally alien setting and unable to benefit to the same extent as middle-class students. This sounds a plausible

thesis, yet this is not quite Bourdieu's position. It is necessary to distinguish between the cultural arbitrary of the school and the scholastic necessary.

For although the school is, indeed, theorised by Bourdieu as an institution responsive to an intrinsically arbitrary class cultural code accepted at all levels of the educational system as an indication of receptivity ("readiness") to acquire school knowledge—in a process that thus knits together in a single social legitimacy arbitrary class cultural style and scholastic and technical knowledge—Bourdieu does *not* argue that in making these judgements the school acts arbitrarily in any practical sense. Lower working class children, he says, do not "bring to their school work either the keenness of lower middle class children or the cultural capital of upper class children" and, consequently, often "take refuge in a kind of negative withdrawal which upset teachers (Bourdieu, 1974, p. 41). There is no suggestion that such "negative withdrawal" describes a "socially constructed" process rather than an actual process, nor that the cultural capital pupils "do not bring to their school work" is to be understood as anything other than real cognitive structures and behavioural dispositions developed within a class culture. Bourdieu actually confirms this interpretation by his advocacy of "systematic and widespread educational priority programmes" as a "really effective way" of challenging the practices of schools which simply allow these social and cultural practices to take place. Thus, although Bourdieu recognises strictly arbitrary elements of class culture and practices of exclusion based on those elements, his general argument is that the school's essential contribution to social and cultural reproduction is effected merely by its tendency to respond to students who are, in fact, "ready" for such schooling, to privilege them in this sense, and to allow the rest, through its structured inability to interrupt that process, to "withdraw" as their only rational response to this relative neglect. In Bourdieu's theory the school's failure is located in its structured refusal to develop a "universal pedagogy"—a pedagogy that takes nothing for granted—able to succeed with relatively unprepared working class pupils.

A school system controlled by the socially and culturally dominant classes, it is supposed, will perceive students who possess the *habitus* of the dominant classes as evidence of "readiness" for school knowledge, and perceive students who possess the *habitus* of the dominated classes as evidence of a deficit of the child or the home, as cultural deprivation, rather than as an indication of a deficiency on the part of the school to develop pedagogic practices responsive to the mental formation and behavioural dispositions such children bring to school. Thus, Bourdieu's theory suggests that the school will generally ignore the *habitus* of children of non-dominant classes, and that this mechanism, indeed, is the primary cause of the low attainments of working class students, but where the *habitus* is produced by a culture of resistance to class or ethnic domination ("negative withdrawal which upsets teachers") the strategies of the school, and other elements collaborating with it, will be to isolate, transform and eradicate the expression of that culture of resistance (even though denied recognition as "culture") together with its very forms.

At one level a school is a school is a school. An English school and a Welsh school, a Swedish school and a Flemish school are dissimilar in that the language of instruction, the literature, the music and social studies curriculums are all quite different. And yet at another level it makes sense to see the schools as having the same culture. Literacy, numeracy, scientific practice, the internal structuring and

ordering of knowledge, and so on, are all shared. Individual schools, naturally, vary a great deal. We can pick out, for example, traditional English schools like Eton and progressive schools like Summerhill and yet nevertheless be sure that the necessary and essential culture of those schools, as schools, is not dissimilar. It may be more precise, in fact, to speak here of the culture of literacy and science rather than the culture of the school.

A Universal Pedagogy?

Bourdieu is by no means the first to believe that a “universal pedagogy” (or, indeed, a culturally specific pedagogy) can be devised and implemented with the result that differences in cognitive structures developed by modes of socialisation practised within class and ethnic cultures (or sub-cultures) can be eliminated by advancing the progress of students from such origins to the level of middle class children. There is little in the literature of pedagogy, however, to encourage this view. Specifically, it is difficult to imagine a way of imparting numeracy and literacy, a developmental imperative in a technological society, in such a way that those already cognitively and socially prepared to assimilate this instruction will not move ahead and stay ahead of those not so prepared.

The fundamental task of the school is to enable students to learn to comprehend the nature of the social and material world and to act upon it to achieve those individual and collective goals which give them reasons to act. All this requires a certain cognitive structuring that is independent of the cultural arbitrary. To refuse to accept, on ill-considered grounds of cultural relativism, that some forms of socialisation produce children who are less well-endowed with these actual cognitive structures than others, or less competent intellectually, is blinkered. It is vitally important, in this context, to differentiate between, (i) cognitive structures and forms of behaviour generated by class and ethnic cultural codes that reflect the cultural arbitrary and thus are amenable to a universal or specific pedagogy, and (ii) cognitive structures and forms of behaviour generated by familial incompetence or neglect, even if common within a community, that cannot be derived from the entire meaning complex of the culture. Where the culture of a community is characterised by demoralisation about its position and its future (Bourdieu's, 1978, discussion of the demoralisation that affected French peasant families in the economic crisis between the wars is relevant here), the school has a responsibility to assist in the task of cultural reconstruction which will necessitate working through key elements of the broad cultural traditions of the community.

A final issue raised in this context by the Bourdieuan approach concerns the “compensatory” education solution to the problem of the primary school. The school has a necessary culture and thus children prepared within that culture by the home will perform better there than other children and there is no way around that. Bourdieu understands this but the texts are ambiguous and open to careless interpretations. The idea that one could develop a pedagogy which would be “fair” to those prepared in the *necessary* culture of the school and those not so prepared is absurd. One could only hold back children prepared to accept the necessary culture of the school (who are not only and not necessarily middle class) by refusing to teach them at all; and even then a good many would simply teach themselves. In short, it is necessary to strive to create an actually common culture

of literacy. But, of course, given the reality of the economic division of labour, middle class people who *must* possess this culture have a very great advantage. That the literate culture of the schools is in an anthropological sense itself an arbitrary, and that many cultures in the world do not share this culture, is of no relevance to this argument.

Primary and Secondary Differences

Boudon's (1971) primary/secondary distinction is important and given insufficient recognition by the Bourdieuan analysis. We have to explain (i) differences in actual performance at school and (ii) differences in the destination preferences of students with similar credentials. There is a difficult methodological problem here because to know why students drop out may be determined generally by carrying out ethnographic studies in which the decision is studied in context. To some extent this is also possible when students opt out of school learning at school but differences in ability at primary and early secondary school when students do not appear to be "resisting" are another question altogether. It is no use asking a 10 year-old why he or she can't read better and expect to receive a sensible answer. The distinction between primary and secondary effects must be understood as one which can only be made in an appropriate context. Yet the distinction is real and primary and secondary differences may not necessarily have the same causes. The differences in education between boys and girls, for example, are entirely secondary effects and this has certain implications for the analysis of effective causality. If we know that teachers interact more with boys, for example, in English (in which girls do better than boys) and maths (where boys do better than girls) then we can only suppose that this behaviour has absolutely no effect whatever on the differences in boys' and girls' attainments. Despite this it is not uncommon to encounter class-room based research which seeks to explain a secondary effect in terms of such teacher practices.

Bourdieu (1974, p. 35) seems to recognise secondary effects when he writes:

Although success at school directly linked to the cultural capital transmitted by the family milieu, plays a part in the choice of options taken up, it seems that the major determinant of study is the family attitude to the school which is itself, as we have seen a function of the objective hopes of success at school which define each logical category.

Most importantly Bourdieu separates in this passage the concept of *cultural capital*, as acquired cognitive schemata and behavioural dispositions, and *family attitudes* to the school, that is to say *class values*. Families adopt a constellation of values, cultural values, as a result of their class location. In this respect class location generates a culture of scholastic expectations—that may also be mediated by ethnicity and sex—reflecting the objective destiny of "people like us". For Bourdieu class values are given by the *habitus* but they are not to be understood as cultural capital. It is arguable that Boudon's depiction of Bourdieu's theory as a culturalist account of secondary effects, in terms of *habitus*, rests on a misunderstanding. Bourdieu's account of the class related tendency of students to enter further education, independently of their attainments, that is his theory of secondary effects, is a value theory of the type Boudon elaborates within game theory. Moreover, although Bourdieu does not discuss such a

mechanism and, indeed, fails to offer any mechanism at all, thus leaving the process through which individuals interiorise the collective expectation produced within their culture “for people like us”, open to criticism as circular and determinist, his account is actually fully consistent with Boudon’s theory.

In *Distinction*, Bourdieu (1986), the issue of working class culture is discussed at length. The general theory suggests that objective situations, specifically the class distribution of educational opportunities, are known to working class communities and inform their culture. This culture, the systems of meaning produced by working class people as they live within the framework of opportunities and constraints that structure their life chances, is internalised and lived in such a way that “naturally” shapes the perceptions of those socialised within it. We can recognise that a culture is produced in which ‘settling for what you have got’, ‘not pushing your luck’ becomes the common-sense of that culture. We can recognise also that for an individual to make a choice outside this construction of common-sense means to break with the culture, to part company with family and friends for an unknown destination, the opportunity costs of which are pressingly apparent while the benefits are vague and indeterminable. The practices developed by social groups as ‘right and proper’, ‘fitting’, ‘natural’ and ‘taken for granted’ in relation to schooling should be understood as elements of the reproductive strategies of the group in as much that adherence to these ‘obvious’ routines will, in general, achieve the “natural” outcome of social reproduction. Bourdieu’s theory of educational inequality and social reproduction must be regarded as enhanced by recent work on youth sub-cultures and school resistance and this work, together with Boudon’s elaboration of the mechanisms of secondary effects helps to clarify processes hinted at by Bourdieu. When working class students choose to pursue lower rather than higher level educational paths they probably are influenced by considerations and lines of reasoning that Boudon has described. That is to say they act rationally in that the objective cost/benefit sum is greater for a working class student for whom the study of, say, medicine represents a considerable degree of social mobility and a middle class student for whom anything less than medicine represents a fall in current status. But among the considerations they may also take into account are that higher level positions are the cultural property of another group, that they will not ‘fit in’, that they will be ‘put down’, academically and socially excluded. Boudon does not deny this but he does reject the suggestion that bourgeois cultural practices might not only “psyche out”, that is demoralise working class students simply by their confidence, their self-assurance, just by their taken-for-granted certainty of success that the possession of an élite class *habitus* generates, but are also to some extent retained within the cultural repertoire because of this very effect. Nonetheless, such processes are open to investigation by the methods of cultural studies and they may well have relevance.

A Dual Account of Domination?

A further criticism may be noted. Elster (1980) has suggested that Bourdieu’s theory actually contains a dual account of educational inequality and is in that respect open to the charge of redundancy. It seems that Bourdieu argues that the middle classes are generally able to reproduce their position in successive generations, first, because they possess the culturally requisite intellectual and social

resources necessary for success in an educational system controlled by them *and*, second, because their cultural practices actively exclude as inferior those of the culturally dominated classes. However, if personal cultural resources, understood as cognitive structures and behavioural dispositions, account for the superior educational performance of children of the dominant cultural classes, and if their consequent possession of credentialled knowledge determines their placement in the directive positions of the occupational class structure, then to suppose in addition that social and cultural practices of exclusion and systematic attempts to foster internalised conceptions of social inferiority also account for educational and social inequality is to over-explain the phenomena. That is a neatly formal criticism that may be addressed briefly.

We may note that Bourdieu insists that the habits of mind, the categories of thought, that is the culture of dominant groups, are acquired “naturally”, through the processes of socialisation practised within that group. Now, in so far as those cultural practices are arbitrary it becomes necessary—if real privileges based on those codes and practices are, in fact, maintained—to protect the means of their transmission, to legitimate by objective mechanisms their arbitrary, and to negate the social and cultural pretensions of other groups. In other words, if elements of the taken-for-granted constructions and practices of a socially and culturally dominant class are specifically employed as potent emblems to signify class membership, then it is necessary to recognise such practices as practices of social and cultural exclusion. Bourdieu argues that such practices *can* be recognised and that those who inherit the dominant culture *do* actively strive to maintain what they regard as *their* symbolic patrimony, *their* heritage, by various systematic devices. Bourdieu argues that in this manner *their* culture, the culture of the dominant classes, becomes “culture” itself and the exclusion of those deemed to have no “right” to inherit thus involves a denial of their claim to possess any culture—indeed, “culture” itself. It cannot sensibly be denied that such practices could exist and, therefore, it must be concluded that a theory lacking the ‘dualism’ of Bourdieu’s denies its capacity to determine in any particular cultural instance whether they are practised or not. If, as a matter of fact, the educational achievements of working class students are affected at any level to any extent by (i) cognitive skills and behavioural dispositions acquired through class socialisation, that is development within a culture lived by certain groups within a class, and (ii) by social practices of exclusion, then a theory able to conceptualise that complex reality is necessary.

Internalising One’s Fate

Bourdieu actually relates his discussion of the processes by which social groups come to “interiorise their statistical fate” to Lewin’s (1973) reference group social psychology and although obscure hints of Durkheimian mysticism—the notion that social statistics are a reflection of the determining *conscience collective*—may be detected in Bourdieu’s discourse this is not his considered position. Bourdieu’s theory is essentially an exclusion theory; working-class and cultural minority children, on average, fail in the school system because it is specifically designed to exclude them by neglect. It is easy to understand the radical appeal of this theory. However, the explanation of the mechanisms of exclusion raises large questions.

Several writers have noted that the educational and occupational destinations of family members are often very dissimilar and have construed this as evidence against the potency of familial capital which Bourdieu's thesis appears to demand. If brothers commonly perform quite differently at school and pursue careers leading to incomes almost as much at variance as if they were strangers, as some research suggests, then, given that brothers must have been presented with the opportunity to acquire the same familial cultural capital, the argument that familial cultural capital is the fundamental determinant of educational success is called into question. It is interesting to see how Bourdieu deals with this criticism. The fact that members of a class initially possessing a certain economic and cultural capital have a certain probability of pursuing a trajectory leading to a given position without success, he says, means that a certain fraction of that class are not so destined to succeed. The objective probability of the statistics of failure are as necessarily an element of the resulting class *habitus* as those of success. Hence, when individuals from the same family, brothers, for example, assume divergent trajectories that only confirms the more complex description of that class *habitus*. Many, out of sympathy with Bourdieu's mode of analysis, are likely at this point to throw up their hands in dismissal of the whole argument. It is always possible within the Bourdieuan framework, it seems, to argue that within the culture of the subordinate classes there exists a distinctive sub-culture with a cultural trajectory approximating to that of the dominant class, but such explanations look uncomfortably arbitrary and after the fact. It is an argument, however, perfectly consistent with Bourdieu's theoretical assumptions. The mistake of his critics is to treat this theory as one which can be falsified.

But while Bourdieu's case is formally consistent is it of any substantive value? The implicit explanation in the conventional sociology of education is a theory of disadvantage. The more points of disadvantage an individual is burdened with the less likely he or she is to succeed and the explanation for that is simply a matter of common sense. Such theories are essentially 'hurdle' theories based on methodological individualism. If a black working-class girl, for example, leaves school at 16 and fails to find employment, then no sociology student will have any difficulty in explaining how she comes to occupy that position, indeed, even make it seem inevitable—that against the oppressive power of the social structure she had no choice. But if she succeeds, it is possible only to say that her success is 'against the odds', and that is no explanation whatever. Moreover, formally, since the explanation of success is worthless the same must be true of the explanation of failure; but sociology is rarely so formal. There are major problems with this 'hurdle' theory of social educational differentiation which cannot be discussed further here but when the concept of *habitus* is added on to such theories, as a 'magic bullet', it naturally fails. Bourdieu's theory, however, although a socialisation theory, is not designed to explain individual actions. The first and primary reference to *habitus* is to the objective structures in which sociological explanations of group practices and strategies are formulated and which become embodied in individuals. If a certain number of lower class and ethnic minority students do succeed in the educational system that is to be explained, like all other social phenomenon, in terms of the complex and heterogeneous set of objective structures which organise people's lives. As to individuals, sociology has nothing to say, it is, at that level a matter of statistical chance: anything else is a matter for social psychology. The conventional approach is actually rooted in the

reasons for individual failure which it simply adds up to create a statistical re-description of the differential opportunities individuals from different social groups enjoy. It is not surprising that such methodologists find *habitus* difficult to apply in concrete cases.

Obviously, in order to avoid circularity it is necessary for Bourdieu to specify the objective structures he believes generate a *habitus* which makes possible practice which lead to a degree of success within working class cultural communities in terms which exclude that rate of success as a causal structure of the complex *habitus* of that community. That, however, Bourdieu can hardly do, for he holds that such knowledge is an actual part of the community's own taken-for-granted knowledge which members take into account in the production of their social practice. It is the circularity of the social process itself which demands a circular explanatory theory.

What Can a Theory of Socialisation Explain?

Socialisation theories explain how people come to be members of their culture, and explanations of their actions or 'practices' in terms of their socialisation are essentially observations that people do what they have been brought up to do. Such accounts do provide an explanation of sorts, if we know that boys tend to play with toy guns because they have been brought up that way then at least we know that this behaviour is not innate, but they have a somewhat limited value. When socialisation theories are used to explain why students engage in some practice—remaining at school, leaving school—the explanation is likely to be unsatisfactory without some description of exactly what socialisation is supposed to be responsible for and how it is involved. Just to say that a student left school because of a disposition to leave which reflects the objective chances students in the group into which he or she was socialised is unconvincing. If, however, we have a rich ethnographic description articulated within a fully developed theory the situation is a little different. If it can be shown that the experience of a certain social group produces a characteristic culture which disposes those brought up within that culture to develop characteristic preferences then actions which follow those preferences are explained to the extent, and only to the extent, that preferences do account for actions. In fact, the explanation of preferences is essential to a theory of choice.

The following discussion is prompted by the need to reconsider the status of Bourdieu's theory as a basis for the explanation of socially differentiated scholastic attainment. Bourdieu gives us every reason to take seriously his theory of socialisation. This passage from *Distinction* states the position clearly:

The cognitive structures which social agents implement in their practical knowledge of the social world are internalised, 'embodied' social structures. The practical knowledge of the social world that is presupposed by 'reasonable' behaviour within it implements classificatory schemes (or 'forms of classification', 'mental structures' or 'symbolic forms'—apart from their connotations, these expressions are virtually interchangeable), historical schemes of perception and appreciation which are the product of the objective division into classes (age groups, genders, social classes) and which function below the level of consciousness and dis-

course. Being the incorporation of the fundamental structures of society, these principles of division are common to all agents of the society and make possible the production of a common, meaningful world, a common-sense world. (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 468)

Similar arguments may be found in discussions of ideology and hegemony and the idea is obvious enough. We can only think what our culture makes it possible for us to think, and we can only do what our culture makes it possible for us to do, and so on. The thesis strikes one as either banal or profound depending on one's temperament. If we are talking about an internalised set of master patterns that structure perception and action then we are talking about the power of socialisation. So what work does the concept of *habitus* do? We can say that people are limited in what they can think and do because of these really effective limits to what they know about what is possible for them. But what of practice? Consider a nineteenth century English working class community and its categories for thinking about husbands (dichotomised for the structuralists' convenience): a one woman man—a ladies' man; a steady man—a bit of a lad; keeps his hands to himself—too free with his fists; a good provider—a spendthrift; a family man—a man who won't lift a hand in the house; a man who brings his money home—a tight-fist, and so on. Suppose now that we have a young woman brought up in such a community. She has internalised these rules that specify how a 'good husband' is to be recognised. It is possible for her to reject these rules? Can she decide that "keeps his hands to himself—free with his fists" is an unacceptable and irrelevant dimension in that it implicitly recognises and sanctions violent behaviour within certain implicit rules, can she reject the notion of a 'provider' with its clear patriarchal implications? Or is such rejection actually not possible because there are no cultural rules which allow for their rejection? To argue this position is, indeed, to present if not a full-scale cultural determinism, then a vision of a life trajectory as something like a railway journey with strictly controlled socially permissible choice points at certain branch lines. In such a theory a complex map of the possible life routes could be described. Perhaps when the *habitus* is said to work below the level of consciousness Bourdieu means that although such a woman might consciously attempt to reject the categorical terms with which her culture 'thinks', she cannot for they continue to influence her bodily feelings and responses in such a way that her conscious attempts at decision-making are doomed to be mere rationalisations of practices already determined by the effective structures. For all that she might reject consciously these cultural values she nevertheless feels most comfortable with "a good provider" and is unable to suppress a feeling of security from her knowledge that a man "is not free with his fists".

Several objections may be brought against such a position. We may insist that the possibility of rejecting the categorical framework of the culture is always a possibility open to any individual who has reflected on such questions. Rejection is an intrinsic human freedom. We need no cultural permission, no cultural tools of thought, to allow us as people who just possess the means of linguistic expression to say, "I don't like this 'providers' thing—we both *provide*—we both bring in money and help around the house—I don't want a 'provider'". It must also be recognised that in a literate society the habit of reading books makes this more and more likely. People have access to ideas beyond their immediate cultural community. What is more they can think for themselves even the socially

“unthinkable”. As to the empirical, psychological question that is open to investigation. Where women have rejected the code of their cultural community, do they, nevertheless, tend in an apparently contradictory fashion to marry the same sort of men as their sisters who have not rejected it?

This really draws attention to the fact that the entire discussion of action and choice, domination and freedom, knowledge and ideology, is not so much inadequate as missing in Bourdieu's work. In practice, certainly in the hands of his followers, *habitus* collapses into an over-socialised conception of individual actors and an unwilling circular determinism. However, as I have argued, Bourdieu's socialisation theory, the theory of *habitus*, has not been developed as such, to form the basis of an explanatory sociology (or social-psychology), but to play a theoretical role as that which mediates between structure (which is the explanatory level) and social practices which are the object of explanation. Explanations of social practice in terms of socialisation have a rather limited application, but Bourdieu seeks to explain social practices in terms of objective structures, which is very different. Whether this project can succeed is another matter.

Anglicising Bourdieu?

English language sociologists have trouble in understanding Bourdieu's theory even at the level of textual clarity, Heath (1982, p. 88), for example, finds it “couched in obscure, ill-defined language”, Jenkins (1989) suspects that his “ugly”, “obscurantist” and “dense” prose is a deliberate attempt to communicate the “great man's distinction” and even Hammersley (1981), attempting to defend Bourdieu against what he sees as false interpretations, admits the texts to be “vague” and “inconsistent”. The justification advanced in the introduction to *Distinction*, that a complex social reality can only be represented in an equally complex prose form should not be taken seriously. That Bourdieu's writing is so difficult has contradictory effects. To an extent it provides protection from criticism, since so few students are able or willing to invest the time necessary to study the work in depth and those who do are ever at risk from the ‘experts’ with their own self-proclaimed superior level of understanding, but it also leads to a level of critical neglect. English speaking sociology of education has, in effect, found it easier to utilise Bourdieu's concepts and respond to his concerns rather face the task of criticising his work directly. This article is an attempt to remedy that omission.

If the reproduction strategies of class-located and hence differentially resourced families are recognised as the fundamental source of socially differentiated educational attainment the material core of Bourdieu's approach is retained securely. It is interesting to note that Meade (1977) proposed just such an approach, even making the same threefold division of economic, cultural and social resources, before Bourdieu's work had come to the attention of English speaking sociologists. The real value of Bourdieu's work to such a materialist sociology of education is likely to reside in its thematic concerns and its breadth of attention rather than in its provision of an explanatory conceptual vocabulary. Many English language sociologists, failing to understand this point, find Bourdieu hard to deal with. *Habitus*, in particular, gives them great trouble. Brown (1987, p. 3), for example, complains that “. . . when the idea of *habitus* is related to concrete situations, it becomes difficult to unravel what the concept is being

used to describe or explain.” MacLeod experiences similar difficulties and his ambivalence towards Bourdieu is plainly evident. Writing of a group of white boys who are dropping out of school MacLeod (1987, p. 107) observes, after a discussion conducted in the terms of game theory, that “[t]heir unwillingness to partake of the educational system stems from an assessment of the costs and benefits of playing the game”. But having said that he then remarks. “Bourdieu’s theory that the *habitus* engenders aspirations that reflect objective possibilities seems accurate” (ibid., p. 116). This, nevertheless, does not alter his view of Bourdieu’s theory as “somewhat determinist”. Unable to see how *habitus* can account for the different trajectories followed by actors equally resourced and subject to the same set of objective constraints, he concludes that, “[h]ow lower-class youths react to an objective situation that is weighted heavily against them depends on a number of mediating factors and ultimately is contingent” (ibid., p. 149). This admission of defeat nicely conveys the sense of frustration Anglo-Saxon sociologists of education typically experience when they attempt to ‘apply’ Bourdieu’s concept of *habitus* as an explanatory tool in a social-psychological account.

It is necessary to insist that for Bourdieu the culture *is* the language, the categories, and the principles of living. Thus culture is the object of an analysis which seeks the relations of structural homology between its various delineated elements—its rules or codes of housing, eating, gift exchange, and so on. The practices which realise this encoded culture must necessarily be the practices of people who are the embodiments of that culture. This means that whatever we do is a cultural act, by definition, for practice must be a product of the internalised rules. This fundamental assumption reveals Bourdieu, in the terms of English language sociology at least, as still committed to the structuralist project. Critics of structuralism, for example Bunge, regard the theorisation of culture in this structuralist and idealist manner as an error. It is not, they say, the *culture of the group* that is prior to the individual but the *group*. It is the group that teaches its young the practices by which it organises social life and the culture of the group has no supra-explanatory role. We do what we chose to do and what we chose to do must be what we have learned to do and want. What we can do depends on what there is to do, what we have to do it with, on what we think we are likely to get and lose as a result, and on what others will let us do. What we have learned to do and want has been learned from our culture and what a viable culture teaches us must be routines which will effect its reproduction. This is a somewhat stripped down Anglo-Saxon text, but there is no need to support mystification. A “theory of practice” in Bourdieu’s formulation, where practice is derived from an internalised set of cultural rules, negates the theory of action, blurs the concept of choice, and introduces confusion, circularity and pseudo-determinism.

As to the sociology of education what, critics may ask, is wrong with the conventional theory which takes much the following form? Suppose children naturally differ to some extent in their ability to acquire the skills and cognitive concepts of the school (which they almost certainly do), suppose also that working-class and cultural minority families because of their location in the division of labour typically differ in the degree of recognition and respect they give to the culture of literacy (which they undoubtedly do), then it can be expected that the non-arbitrary culture of the school will inevitably exclude children ill-endowed with these elements of necessary cultural capital. Not all

working class children are ill-endowed (at least with respect to a culture of literacy) and some of those who are may be innately bright enough to assimilate the schools' instruction. Suppose then that families well resourced in capital and social contacts gain most of their advantage in the secondary stage of destination choice. Suppose moreover that well resourced families are also much more likely to be effective in interrupting the initial impetus of a downward trajectory and preventing it from becoming permanent. The school cannot be expected to be other than co-operative in this respect. That working class families with 'average' children are more likely to accept their 'fate' and the school rather more likely to confirm that 'fate' is unsurprising. Moreover, that working class parents are more likely to accept that fate (or rather their children's) in this way should not necessarily be seen as evidence of dominant ideology—those who lack the resources required to intervene might as well accept it. We can only argue from the evidence to what seems plausible: and resource theory in which the best resourced agents have the best opportunities of getting what they want is hardly implausible. There is, I suggest, nothing at all wrong with the theory sketched in these few sentences. But it is obstructed rather than clarified by contact with the concept of *habitus*.

The sociology of education has learned a great deal from Bourdieu. There is no doubt that in Bourdieu we are dealing with a very important and richly creative social theorist. As a result of his work we have been able to think about problems which were unduly neglected and, above all, to recognise the interconnections between social processes and practices which conventional methodologies and arbitrary academic boundaries do so much to obscure. Through Bourdieu's work we have been able to reconstruct a theory of the family and recover the centrality of family resources to educational differentiation within a radical context which allays the fear of a retreat to cultural deficit theory. The analogical, metaphorical nature of his core concepts has forced comparisons and connections that have been fruitful. If Bourdieu has forced Anglo-Saxon thinkers to change direction, to see things in a more complex and unitary fashion, then the uncomfortable struggle with an alien structuralism may be an acceptable price to pay (Harker *et al.*, 1990). Perhaps his most important single contribution has been to relate family strategies of reproduction to changes in the mode of production and the mode of reproduction. But we should not allow Bourdieu's materialist insights into social processes to be limited by the inherently ambiguous and over-loaded central concept of *habitus*.

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