


# Notes on the Class Theory of Pierre Bourdieu

  
*Brown University*  
*Department of Sociology*  
*Providence, RI*

## Abstract

“With some over-simplification, one might thus say that classes are stratified according to their relations to the production and acquisition of goods, whereas status groups are stratified according to the principles of their consumption of goods as represented by special styles of life”  
*(Max Weber, Economy and Society, p. 937).*

In order to avoid what he calls ‘the subjectivist illusion’, in *Distinction*, Bourdieu sees it necessary to construct the social space of class locations as an ‘objective space’ (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 244). However, he is quick to disown a purely structuralist perspective by arguing that sociologists’ search for greater objectivity motivates them to treat social agents as things (p. 169). Thus, he adopts, in his own terms, a constructivist-structuralist position, which best captures the interplay of (class) structure and (class) habitus.

First, I will suggest that Bourdieu’s idea of class structure, the objective space of class relations, has a much closer resemblance to a Weberian class theory than a Marxian one. For Weber, a class (situation) is defined by individuals’ relationship to economic assets, which gives them unequal market capacities for exchange relationships, which, in return, results in differences (inequalities) in the distribution of life chances. At last, unequal life chances may be a factor behind class struggles. These struggles, contra Marx, are primarily oriented towards distribution and not production. Therefore, for Weber, “class situation is ... ultimately market situation” (Weber, 1978, p. 928). On the other hand, for Marx, class denotes a particular relationship to the means of production, which locates social groups, according to the intensity of class struggles they involve in, in positions of differential control over the labor process. Unequal control over the labor process leads social classes to conflict over production.

Bourdieu’s theory of class has four main linkages to Weber’s conception of class. First, although he claims that there is a homology between the field of production and the field of consumption, a homology stemming from the same logic governing fields, Bourdieu is much more focused on struggles over consumption of goods than their production, at least in *Distinction*. For instance, control over the acquisition of scarce goods, he argues, is one of the distinctive practices of the dominant classes. While such a control necessitates monopoly over productive activities in the last analysis, the bourgeoisie, having the upper hand in market, is able to create an artificial scarcity of goods not directly governed by production itself (One can think of art auctions). In other words, Marx’s labor theory of value has little analytical utility for Bourdieu’s class theory. Sec-

ond, class structure, for Bourdieu, is ultimately demarcated on the basis of the occupational system instead of positions vis-a-vis the means of production. This means that Bourdieu does not engage in a critique of formal classification of occupational groups (e.g. secondary teachers vs. office workers has very little analytical importance for classical Marxist theory), and instead perceives such a classification as an outcome of the practices of making distinctions, and accepts ‘occupational status groups’ à la Weber as given. The third point of resemblance between Bourdieu’s and Weber’s conceptions of class is about class action. For both, there is no direct causal link from the structure of economic relations to class action. Instead, the latter, to a large extent, is mediated by cultural factors. Weber says, “The degree in which ‘social action’ and possible associations emerge from the mass behaviors of the members of a class is linked to general cultural conditions, especially to those of an intellectual sort. It is ... especially linked to the transparency of the connections between the causes and the consequences of the class situation. ... For however different life chances might be, this fact in itself, ... by no means gives birth to class action” (p. 929). Fourth, and most importantly, Bourdieu’s whole endeavor is about integrating status into class. Closing this gap, and demonstrating the mechanisms that lead to their mutual reproduction is the fundamental insight behind the book. In my opinion, Bourdieu takes the Weberian class schema and radicalizes it, or brings a more dynamic element to it, with a Marxian bend. Next, I would like to elaborate on this last point, starting with Weber’s ideas about the relationship between the proxies of class and status.

In *Economy and Society*, Weber suggests, “...class distinctions are linked in the most varied ways with status distinctions. Property as such is not always recognized as a status qualification, but in the long run it is, and with extraordinary regularity”, and he goes on saying, “But status honor need not necessarily be linked with a class situation. On the contrary, it normally stands in sharp opposition to pretensions of sheer property” (p. 932). So, for Weber, it seems that there is at least a significant correlation between class and status, but, in some instances, the latter can operate independent of the

dynamics of a particular 'class situation'. In Weber's terms, for instance, propertied and propertyless can belong to the same status group. In other words, while there are some clear interaction effects, status and class (along with political parties) are independent variables associated with the distribution of power within modern societies.

Moreover, the interaction between status and class is not static. Instead, with the progress of rationalization, class situation becomes 'the predominant factor'. He points out, "After all, the possibility of a style of life expected for members of a status group is usually conditioned economically" (p. 935). So, Weber foresees the gradual dissolution of a system of power distribution based on status honor. He argues, "As to the general effect of the status order, only one consequence can be stated...: the hindrance of the free development of the market. This occurs first for those goods that status groups directly withhold from free exchange by monopolization..." Furthermore, Weber considers the particular morals of status groups as incompatible to the spirit of capitalism: "...the notion of honor peculiar to status absolutely abhors that which is essential to the market: hard-bargaining. [E]verywhere some status groups ... consider almost any kind of overt participation in economic acquisition as absolutely stigmatizing" (p. 937).

Before I start discussing the Bourdieu-Marx debate on social classes, I would like to present my answer to the following crucial question: How does Bourdieu extend upon Weber's idea of class? In my opinion, he does this by re-conceptualizing status as an integral part of class situation. He does this in three main steps. First, he rejects Weber's thesis that rationalization leads to dissolution of status order. Instead, he suggests that in contemporary capitalism, status order becomes embedded into class societies in particular ways. Classes struggle with each other not only over material goods, but also over symbolic goods, distinctions demarcating the borders of their status and legitimating their economic privileges. In this sense, the bourgeoisie is not just a social class, but also a status group with a coherent set of practices that mark their territory. Its ethics is not a hindrance to development of markets, but a factor behind the unequal structuration of markets. In a way, Bourdieu rescues We-

ber's status from becoming an antiquated concept useful only for the analysis of disappearing social groups, and brings it back into contemporary class analysis primarily in order to shed light upon symbolic struggles between social classes. Ultimately, life-styles become a feature of particular class positions. Most evidently, Bourdieu, by integrating status into the modern class condition, discovers the rational aristocrat within the capitalist, and the alienated serf within the worker. Second, Bourdieu argues that class and status are not two distinct phenomena predicting the differential distribution of power within society. They can indeed be separated analytically, in symbolic and material conflicts between classes, however, in practice, they are parts of a whole, they mutually produce unequal life chances for agents, and they constitute the same causal link between the social structures and social action. Struggles for status and class power occur in the same social space, in accordance with the same field logic. Bourdieu takes Weber's idea of a correlation between status and class very seriously. However, he builds upon this insight by exploring a mutual relationship that extends beyond statistical correspondence. Status and class are not just correlated; they are relational and reproduced through the same class practices, which originate from that particular class's position within the matrix of social space. Third, Bourdieu builds upon Weberian notion of class by deriving from the Marxist perspective, where the relationship between classes are constituted by clear antagonistic interests and practices, by domination, appropriation, and exploitation. Here, I start debating on Bourdieu's use of Marx's idea of class.

Up to this point, I have tried to propose and defend the argument that the conceptual arsenal Bourdieu makes use of in order to extend beyond the Marxist schema of class structure comes primarily from Weber. By integration status into class analysis, Bourdieu is able to chart out a multi-dimensional space of class structure, where social classes differentiated not only along the axes of economic ownership, but also along the axes of differential level of access to and control over cultural and symbolic goods. Moreover, many of the class practices Bourdieu was interested in, can be intelligible only when status is conceived as an in-

tegral part of the system of social hierarchy. One only needs to think about symbolic violence, taste-making practices, and all other cultural works undertaken by social classes to exert their distinct status. In short, with the inclusion of status into a system of group differentiation, the field of struggles between classes can no longer be bounded by market situation as Weber would have it, and instead it becomes dispersed into the whole complex of social life with its minute details. In my opinion, Bourdieu's reliance on Marx's notion of class stems from Marx's particular way of designating class relations under capitalist mode of production. In other words, I suggest that while Bourdieu borrows the class structure his theory relies upon from Weber, he develops his perspective on class relations by following the path opened by Marx. This means that the distinctive Marxian elements in Bourdieu's class theory are the modalities of class relationships defined by Marx. Such modalities include the relationships of antagonism, conflict, appropriation, domination, and exploitation. Indeed, for Bourdieu, while class struggles are not a zero-sum game per se, they are acute in the sense that a win-win outcome of class struggles is unlikely.

Here, I will point out the four themes Bourdieu's class analysis owes to Marxist approach. First, for both Marx and Bourdieu, class is the primary source of conflict in modern societies. For both theorists, social structure is primarily a structure of an economic quality with the actions emanating from them, which are also ultimately oriented towards maximizing materialistic utility. While Bourdieu is admittedly much more careful, compared to Marx, in handling other modes of stratification like gender, race, or geographical position, he still treats them as 'secondary principles of division' (p. 107). On the other hand, position in the relations of production remains as the 'fundamental property' of social classes (p. 106). Second, social struggles are the primary mode of class relationship in both Bourdieu's and Marx's analysis. Class struggles can obviously also be incorporated into a Weberian framework of class analysis. However, what is distinct in Marx, as it was adopted by Bourdieu, is the inherent antagonistic orientation of social classes against each other. What social classes experience is not just inequality in market situation

that leads to unequal distribution of life chances, but that their material and symbolic well-being is conditioned upon their struggle against other social classes. It is this particular attention to the dynamics of conflict and domination that brings Bourdieu closer to Marx. Making distinctions involve not just competition between classes for better life chances, but also symbolic domination and dispossession of other classes. In Bourdieu's words, stylization of life through "consumption of goods no doubt always presupposes a labor of appropriation" (p. 100). The inherent conflictual element in class relations can also be considered as an outcome of the strong correspondence between habitus and social structure. Developing and practicing tastes, and hence marking their class boundaries, within a field are natural practices of social classes, as long as they are generated by actors sharing the same positions in social space. Such practices necessarily entail exclusion of and intolerance towards (the lifestyles of) others. In Bourdieu's words, "Tastes are perhaps first and foremost distastes, disgust provoked by horror or visceral intolerance (sick-making) of the tastes of others. ... because each taste feels itself to be natural..." (p. 56)" Third, the history of class struggles is the primary constituting background of the field of social interaction and of particular distribution of capital resources within it. Bourdieu would not go as far as suggesting, "The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles", since such a causal link between class struggles and social structure would be too exclusive of other social dynamics and too generalizing over historical and cultural specificities. Still, for Bourdieu, boundaries of a field and the rules and rewards it contains are determined as a result of class struggles. A field, in other words, is "the balance sheet, at a given moment, of what has been won in previous battles and can be invested in subsequent battles, it expresses a state of power relations between the classes..." (p. 245). Fourth, a radical change in class relations, as opposed to a 'simple displacement in the structure of distributions' of capitals, is possible to the extent that there is a major structural shift in the objective class conditions rather than an ideational transformation. It is my impression that, for Bourdieu, change is likely when a radical shift in objective conditions of a class produces a mismatch between

these conditions and the subjective aspirations of a class, and not the other way around. Bourdieu says, “an abrupt slump in objective chances relative to subjective aspirations is likely to produce a break in the tacit acceptance which the dominated classes ... previously granted to the dominant classes, and so to make possible a genuine inversion of the table of values” (p. 168). Thus, it can be suggested that both Marx and Bourdieu give primacy to structure over agency. In my opinion, Bourdieu is first a structuralist and then a constructivist, and his dominant aspect brings him closer to Marx.

Last, I am going to debate on how Bourdieu develops Marxist conceptions of class. First, as I have discussed above, Bourdieu expands Marxist notions of class by systematically borrowing from the sociological theory of Weber and most notably by re-operationalizing Weber’s concept of status. I am not going to discuss this extensively here. It will suffice to say that, by integrating status and class, Bourdieu gains access to a large conceptual arsenal, which helps him to theorize about symbolic struggles between classes, taste-making practices, and cultural construction of social groups. In short, establishing Marxist class relations on a Weberian social structure allows Bourdieu to remedy the lack of constructivism in the former. Second, with the concept of habitus, Bourdieu aims to avoid a fully deterministic account of the relationship between social structures and social action. How far he is successful in avoiding a strict determinism is open to debate and cannot be answered in this paper. However, it is obvious that, in Bourdieu’s theory, agents classified into class categories are recognized to perform classifying operations, hence reproducing the structure. This reproduction always comes with slight alterations of the structure due to changing balance of power between social classes. With habitus, Bourdieu explains the correspondence between positions and dispositions. He tries to show how “internationalization of social structure” by members of a class leads to the formation of a coherent set of practices, inclinations, and tastes that are specific to that class. At one point, he says, “And finally, it is an immediate adherence, at the deepest level of the habitus, to the tastes and distastes, sympathies and aversions, fantasies and phobias which, more than declared

opinions, forge the unconscious unity of a class” (p. 77). Through class performances, then, dispositions are adjusted to the positions they belong. In this sense, rather than a direct determination, the mediation of habitus allows agents to have a kind of agency, although one that is strongly conditioned to reproduce the existing structure, and also recognizes potential mismatches between structure and social action, which may lead to changes in the class structure. For Bourdieu, “Social class is not defined solely by a position in the relations of production, but by the class habitus, which is ‘normally’ (i.e. with a high statistical probability) associated with that position” (p. 372). So, one might deduce from this quote that habitus is useful in going beyond Marxist determinism to the extent that it recognizes the possibility of an anomaly regarding the correspondence of positions and dispositions. Still, it is difficult for me to justify the argument that what Bourdieu calls “the unconscious unity of a class” is a lot different than what Marx calls “class-in-itself”. However, the specific efficacy of habitus is evident when very different consumption patterns are observed to be associated to the same income level (p. 375).

Third, by theorizing different forms of capitals, Bourdieu is able to differentiate social fields, which have different logics of their own and which are not necessarily governed by material interests. Fourth, by demarcating class boundaries based on the type, volume, and trajectory of capitals attained by social classes, Bourdieu is able to come up with a much more dynamic and accurate representation of class relations than what Marx was able to produce. For instance, Bourdieu argues that classes are divided internally according to the composition of capital they hold. This perspective allows one to systematically observe the particular nature of the relationship between dominating-dominants and dominated-dominants (i.e. the very interesting relationship between intellectuals and the bourgeoisie). Moreover, in Bourdieu’s framework, social classes are able to take up reconversion strategies, which allow them to operate in different fields, to have social mobility, and to modify the class structure to some extent (for instance by moving away from declining jobs, or creating new positions for the unskilled children of bourgeoisie families).

Fifth, with the concept of *illusio*, Bourdieu demonstrates the reproductive character of class struggles, in a way reminding of Przeworski's work. He argues, "[S]ocial contradictions and struggles are not all, or always, in contradiction with the perpetuation of the established order.... The reproduction of the social structure can take place in and through a competitive struggle leading to a simple displacement of the structure of distributions. ... Competitive struggle is the form of class struggle which the dominated classes allow to be imposed on them when they accept the stakes offered by the dominant classes" (pp. 164-5). In this sense, for dominated classes, involving in struggles of symbolic sort can mean an affirmation of the rules of the game set by the dominant and hence of the legitimacy claimed by the bourgeoisie. Sixth, Bourdieu argues that defining a legitimate culture according to which the status of different life-styles is assessed remains at the center of class struggles. The question of legitimacy of a life-style, with the unreplicable set of tastes and practices it entails (such as sobriety, ease, indifference, distance of the bourgeoisie), brings a whole another dimension to class struggles. With legitimate culture belonging to one class, domination is now based on naturalization of a symbolic order. For dominant classes, "acquisition of legitimate culture implies forgetting its acquisition" (p. 3); whereas for the dominated it is a form of domination much difficult to grasp and counter as compared to economic domination. In a fascinating passage, Bourdieu explains this as follows: "Dominated lifestyles, which have practically never received systematic expression, are almost always perceived, even by their defenders, from the destructive or reductive viewpoint of the dominant aesthetic, so that their only options are degradation or self-destructive rehabilitation (popular culture)" (p. 48). While cultural appropriation can be exercised by both dominant and dominated classes (the rich wearing leather jacket, the poor wearing Gucci bag etc.), it is the question of legitimacy that renders the cultural appropriation exercised by the dominated also an exercise of degradation of working class culture. One can think of Gangnam Style video on YouTube, where our protagonist has to make fun of himself, present himself with a funny suit and a funny dance, making sure the audience

recognizes his unfitting-ness to upper-class taste, in order to express a lower-class sense of enjoyment and a desire for upward mobility. Seventh, Bourdieu recognizes the working classes' lack of a political language of their own as a major hindrance against the politics of the dominated, who always has to rely upon the spokespersons of other classes to express their demands. Such alienation from a political language, expressed in absenteeism and in support for populist leaders, prevents the development of autonomous claim-making of the dominated. The list can be extended.

Finally, I would like to propose the argument that class fantasies have a greater explanatory power as a motivational force behind class struggles than Bourdieu recognizes. Bourdieu says, "the adjustment between objective chances and subjective aspirations that is thereby established is both more subtle and more subtly extorted, but also more risky and unstable. Maintaining vagueness in the images of the present and future of one's position is a way of accepting limits, but it is also a way to avoid acknowledging them, or to put it another way, a way of refusing them. Whereas the old system tended to produce clearly demarcated social identities which left little room for social fantasy but were comfortable and reassuring even in the unconditional renunciation which they demanded, the new system of structural instability in the representation of social identity and its legitimate aspirations tends to shift agents from the terrain of social crisis and critique to the terrain of personal critique and crisis" (p. 156). While I agree with Bourdieu on the individualizing effect of the new class structure, I see this class structure also vulnerable to challenges because of its inherent instability, its potential to create continuous mismatches between objective conditions and subjective aspirations of social actors. Especially for intermediary classes, who experience the class structure as a never-ending process of transition, and who always have to feel the tension of having subjective aspirations conflicting their objective conditions, who, in other words, strive in a class fantasy (i.e. Advertisement workers' dream of becoming real artists), fantasy can be a strong motivational force to overcome their objective conditions. Such constant dissatisfaction with the objective class situation can pro-

duce and did indeed produce whole generations of revolutionary figures that had a deep mark on the 20th century political history.

Obviously, such class fantasies are also a part of the reproductive behaviors of the dominated classes. For instance, Bourdieu argues that "Working class meal is characterized by plenty and freedom in order to create the impression of abundance". This is a class fantasy par excellence, which has a place only in the last castle of working class freedom, that is domestic life. On the other hand, the physical strength of the working class and its members' inclination to get physical are not just related to the bodily hexis required for production conditions. Instead, physical violence can be considered as a class fantasy, which subaltern groups employ to break through the symbolic domination imposed by dominant groups. It is based on a fantasy of owning what they were dispossessed through a force they are competent in exercising without falling into the trap of political talk. With physical violence, the symbolic struggles between classes closest to each other take a materialist turn.

Bourdieu says, "He constantly overshoots the mark for fear of falling short, betraying his uncertainty and anxiety about belonging in his anxiety to show or give the impression that he belongs. To assert his pretensions and demands, to advance his interests and upward aspirations- the petit bourgeoisie is inclined to a Berkelian vision of the social world, reducing it to a theater in which being is never more than perceived being, a mental representation of a theatrical performance" (p. 253). I would suggest that the narcissistic drive of the petite-bourgeoisie can also be productive instead of self-destructive. My example would be Bourdieu, who fought his way from being a postman's son to one of the most influential intellectuals of the century. His work attests to this struggle, since if there is one single post Bourdieu positions himself in his book *Distinction*, it is a strong dislike for the bourgeoisie taste. In my opinion, *Distinction* is foremost a product of a dominated-dominant's struggle against the dominating-dominant, by using the techniques of a martial art called sociology.

## References

- [1] Bourdieu, P. (1984). *Distinction: A social critique of the judgement of taste*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.
- [2] Weber, M. (1978). *Economy and society: An outline of interpretive sociology* (Vol. 1): Univ of California Press.

