

## **The Real Bourdieu: Falsity, Euphemism and Truth in Theories of Reproduction**

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### **Introduction**

Bourdieu, now 70 years of age, is one of the world's most eminent sociologists (Harker, Wilkes & Maher, 1990, Robbins, 1991, Jenkins, 1992, Calhoun, LiPuma & Postone, 1993, Shusterman, 1998, Swartz, 1997). His theoretical and methodological studies occupy a respected position at the heart of the discipline. Sociologists of education were among the first to recognise in his approach to social and cultural reproduction a theory of considerable power (Nash, 1990, Reay, 1995, Grenfell & James, 1998). The relationship between economic and cultural forms of capital in the transmission of intergenerational privilege has long been a central focus of Bourdieu's sociology.

Far from being the kind of applied, and hence inferior, science (only suitable for educationalists) that has ordinarily been the view of it, the sociology of education lies at the foundation of a general anthropology of power and legitimacy (Bourdieu, 1996: 5).

This flattering valuation of their discipline by so influential a thinker must be a consolation to sociologists of education, who are all too aware of the 'ordinary view'. But it is also necessary for them to ask what precisely can be learned from Bourdieu that might, in fact, be of some professional value to the 'educationalists' who are their largest group of students. It is not self-evident that a Bourdieuan 'theory of reproduction' will provide teachers with a framework entirely adequate for their pedagogical practice. This is even supposing that such a theory, as a more or less coherent body of concepts and models, can be extracted from his work without becoming severely distorted in the process. These issues are certainly worthy of an elaborated discussion.

### **Theories of Differential Attainment**

For what might teachers look to the sociology of education? One thing is a theory that can explain social differences in access to education. Every teacher must confront obvious differences in the attainments of students at school. In any non-streamed secondary school class there will be a few students competent enough to read anything they might find in the library, and there will one or two, if the intake is anything like representative, barely able to read at all. These differences, moreover, are not distributed randomly throughout the population but, on the contrary, are systematically associated with social background and ethnic origin. The reason for the sociology of education, the real existence of socially differentiated access to education, is manifest in every classroom. It is not surprising, therefore, that theories of differential attainment are of fundamental interest to those who work in schools. There is no shortage of narratives available for their attention. Flude (1974) helped to establish the classic framework for thinking about the various models of differential ability proposed by social science. He offered a four-fold typology:

- ‘deficit theories’, that ‘focus specifically on “deficits” imputed to the sociocultural environment of low-status pupils, particularly those cognitive and linguistic inadequacies, value orientations and self-images that are said to constitute major handicaps to educational achievement’ (p.20).
- labelling theories, ‘which are concerned to elucidate the processes by which certain kinds of educational deviance come to be signified and labelled in a distinctive way and the manner in which teachers as agents of this process interpret aspects of pupils’ behaviour as evidence of “cultural deprivation”, “inadequate home background”, etc. (p.21).
- school resource theories, that focus on ‘the inadequacies of current educational practices, particularly the reluctance of schools to recognise and utilise the diversity of pupils’ cultural backgrounds and experiences’ (p.20).

- structural theories, that 'focus specifically upon the impact of various forms of discrimination associated with the unequal distribution of economic and political resources in the wider society, and the unequal distribution within the education system itself. The educational failure of low-status pupils is a symptom of basic structural inequalities that must be eliminated if these groups are to compete equally for a share of societies' scarce resources' (p.21).

Flude's discussion of the various diagnoses of the differences in pupils' attainments found in the sociology of education has lost little of its cogency with the passage of time. It should also be noted that Flude is critical of 'deficit theories' arguing that:

[t]here is an urgent need to rethink the problem and relocate it - initially at least - in the manner in which teachers' and administrators' categories of social class, ability and knowledge constitute part of the institutional context with which pupils' careers are formed (p.45).

Flude did not deny that pupils' material conditions of life had a significant effect on their response to school. The advice to 'rethink', 'initially at least', was not an injunction to reject out of hand forever all consideration of causes that might be tainted with elements of 'deficit' theory. Flude suggested, in fact, that the issue for sociology might be a matter of 'avoiding the ethnocentric and normative characterisation of low-status groups' (p.45), in other words, of watching our cultural Ps and Qs. It might be thought that in the last quarter of a century most of us have learned that lesson. However, it may even be time to learn another lesson, perhaps along the lines of not throwing the baby out with the bath water.

### **Bourdieu's Theories of Reproduction**

Bourdieu's position is attractive to sociologists of education for some very good reasons. He offers a structural theory of reproduction, in which the dominant classes maintain their position through the control of material and symbolic resources. They are able to manipulate these in an educational system that gains legitimation from its apparent

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commitment to the principles of democratic equality, while acting all the time as a particularly effective conservative force (Bourdieu, 1974, Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977).

Bourdieu, in fact, presents a binary model of class reproduction through education. First, he appeals to the 'statistical mode of reproduction', and, second, he argues that the School - as he writes - actively excludes those it deems to possess an 'inferior' *habitus*. These arguments are actually quite distinct and merit an extended discussion.

The so-called 'statistical mode of reproduction' is introduced in contrast to the more direct modes of family reproduction practised before the adoption of this function by the School (Bourdieu & Boltanski, 1976). If we take ourselves back 150 years or so we find that the dominant classes adopted strategies of intergenerational reproduction that placed their children in occupations through the immediate transmission of financial and symbolic capital. There were real differences in the treatment of sons and daughters. Sons followed in their father's footsteps through a process of direct inheritance, perhaps mediated through an apprenticeship accessed by social contacts and purchase, while daughters were provided with the opportunity to contract a marriage appropriate to their status.

The School, however, changed all this by making educational credentials a necessary requirement of entry to professional and commercial occupations. Reproduction was effected through the transmission of symbolic capital rather than financial capital, and mediated by the 'objective' mechanism of The School which, operating with its own scholastic logic, could ensure only the general, that is statistical, success of the dominant classes.

Bourdieu argues that students internalise the odds of success within their social group and, acting within such a *habitus*, are bound collectively to reproduce them given the continued existence of the operative structures of the field. The model requires that all individuals from a certain group have the odds of success and failure for their group embodied in a generative *habitus*. This means that if, for example, only 5% of lower

working-class children enter university, children from this class have a taken-for-granted knowledge of the odds against them built-in to the *habitus* and so reproduce them. In order for this argument to work it would have to be shown that individuals possessed a learned ability to estimate the probability of those 'like themselves' to achieve any relevant future state, and that their actions were shaped in accordance with that knowledge. It is difficult to imagine how such a thesis could be demonstrated: people certainly have specific dispositions to act, but they do not have *that* kind of disposition - and it is *unrealistic* to suppose that they do in order to maintain a form of 'statistical' explanation. The argument, however, has been widely accepted and has a certain 'radical' attraction.

Bourdieu's thesis that the School acts as a conservative force to exclude the mass of working-class students by recognising as educable only those with a dominant *habitus* and thus excluding others by its active neglect, offers a different perspective on the reproductive process. The account rests, in fact, on a number of assumptions that must be made explicit. Bourdieu's sociology has the form of a structure-disposition-practice model. The task of sociology is to explain social events and processes by disclosing the mechanisms that bring them about. To be adequate and sufficient, a social explanation requires an account in which social structures, habituated dispositions, and effective practices are all included. The analytical scheme must move, in reverse order, from the observed practices of agents, to their interests and intentions, and, finally, to the social structures in which they are formed. It is almost as simple as this: social positions generate socialised dispositions and socialised dispositions generate practices. Such schemes have, in fact, the force of common sense. At the level of practice, school learning is achieved by attending classes, listening to the teacher, taking notes, reading books, completing in-class and homework assignments, and so on. At the level of disposition, students adopt such actions because they have high aspirations, positive self-concepts, and a willingness to identify with the School. Finally, at the level of structure, students acquire such dispositions through socialisation practices based on the effective resources mobilised - largely by their class-located families - acting in their own immediate and long term interests. The framework should seem familiar: in fact,

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explanatory schemes of this sort are well established in sociology and anthropology, and it may be useful to draw out the links by comparing, necessarily in an introductory fashion, some common ground between Bourdieu and the once dominant sociological approach of Parsons.

In Parsons' (1954) general systems theory, social structure is a set of positions constituting institutionalised roles; in Bourdieu's theory, structure in its primary reference is a set of principles (sacred/profane, refined/vulgar, light/heavy, and so on) constituting culture as a code. In Parsons' theory, actors internalise a 'script' that enables them to play out their roles; in Bourdieu's theory social members internalise the principles of their culture as a *habitus*. In Parsons' theory, 'pattern maintenance' is effected through the performance of stable roles; in Bourdieu's theory, reproduction is achieved because social members internalise the 'rules of the game' and so adopt practices that ensure their 'unconscious' replication. Swartz (1997: 6) notes that Bourdieu's work is concerned with 'the question of how stratified social systems of hierarchy and domination persist and reproduce from one generation to the next without powerful resistance and without the conscious recognition of their members'. Parsons' interest in 'pattern maintenance' stemmed from different political concerns, but both approaches have a similar explanatory framework. Sorokin (1998: 166), once observed of Parsons' scheme that it likened individuals socialised into the 'total culture' to records played on a 'partly defective phonograph that now and then gets out of order', and similar nerveless comments have been made about Bourdieu's model.

The point of this comparison is not to argue that Parsons and Bourdieu are 'saying the same thing', to reduce one to the other, but to show that both work with a structure-disposition-practice scheme that recognises the properties of social organisations, the powers of individuals as a socialised actors, and the generation of practices with the function of maintaining or reproducing the social system.

So to the argument that The School excludes those with a non-valued *habitus*. There is a convenient 'perspective' by which any negatively regarded social event or state of affairs

can be viewed as the consequence of a system failure. In the sociology of education we are familiar with an argument having this structure: the attainments of working-class students are lower than those of middle-class students and, therefore, the educational system has plainly failed to provide equality of educational opportunity. It follows that policies of reform directed at the School, in its forms of government, and in its modes of curriculum, pedagogy, and evaluation, must be effected in order to bring about the equity of social outcomes that alone will demonstrate actual equality of opportunity. This argument, notwithstanding frequent protests at its self-evident circularity (Murphy, 1990, Wilson, 1991), retains a stubborn attraction for many in education and, indeed, for educational policy-makers is all but mandated by statute.

Of course, there is actually little for the sociology of education to do within such a paradigm but refer to the 'structural' inequities of the educational system and describe the mechanisms of process. In the so-called qualitative methodology of sociological research in education, this need involve only the description of such surface features of schooling that appear to support the required conclusion (Jones, 1991, Thrupp, 1997). Such literature maintains a 'structuralist' position (explanations in the high abstractions of 'capitalist hegemony' are much less self-threatening to the 'critical class' than those that recognise the importance of bedtime stories), in which the only mediating variables admitted are those active at sites selected for their apparent policy importance. This means that they may account for no more than a tiny proportion of the explained variance in social differences in access to education. This thesis was developed in the 1960s in opposition to the then prevailing liberal doctrine that the School could become an instrument of social mobility and equality. Bourdieu's argument that the School acts as a conservative force identifies the School as the active agent of exclusion. However to gain conviction there needs to be some evidence that the School's act of non-recognition with respect to non-dominant *habitus* is arbitrary.

### **The Arbitrary and the Necessary**

'Arbitrary' is a term with a special meaning in anthropology. The world has known tens of thousands of viable societies and their modes of organisation are extremely variable.

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This society practices monogamy, that one polygamy; this society provides its women with dowries, that one requires a bride-price; in this society the eldest son is heir, in that one the youngest, and so on and so forth. The adoption of one functional mode of practice rather than another is arbitrary: in all societies there is some form of marriage, women are 'exchanged', and property is transmitted to succeeding generations. In this sense anthropologists and sociologists are committed by their knowledge to a form of relativism.

The school curriculum is arbitrary in the same way. In New Zealand, not so long ago, secondary school mathematics was largely a matter of learning and applying proofs, but it now has a quite different character (Openshaw, 1991). It seems that what is taught in School is arbitrary and relative; the knowledge of the dominant classes and structured to meet their interests and needs. In this view, the massive failure experienced by working-class students as a group, is created within and by the school system, with its finally arbitrary preference for 'middle-class' modes of thinking. The failure of students from dominated groups has its origin in this fact. Whatever difference there might be in the frames of mind and customary behaviour of students from dominated groups they should be recognised as relatively superficial attributes, themselves the result of economic and social disadvantage and privilege, with no necessary consequences for school learning provided only that appropriate forms of pedagogy, curriculum, and evaluation are set in place (Whitty and Young, 1977). This 'critical' view has considerable support among left-wing teachers.

However what if the forms of knowledge and their transmission in the School are not *entirely* arbitrary in this 'radical' class sense? What if it is in large part actually *necessary* to the provision of education in the universal culture of the modern world? Is it that the nature of the world cannot be grasped in concepts adequate for its full comprehension without the culture of logic and science? Suppose that modern science is broadly and fundamentally correct about the world (Bhaskar, 1979, Nash, 1999b), then must that knowledge, which is abstract and complex, not be transmitted by the School?



Half the population of Auckland cross the harbour bridge everyday, but it could not have been built without engineers who understood the mathematics of their trade. Without modern scientific knowledge, which means the scientists who possess it, our entire civilisation would collapse in 48 hours. Logical and critical thought is equally important, and the contemporary school must place the order of logic and science at its heart.

Schools reflect the cultural arbitrary of the national, sub-national, or ethnic culture within which they are located. In this sense, French-medium schools (whether in Paris, Geneva, Montreal or Noumea) reflect a particular and distinctive cultural arbitrary, but they share the *necessary culture* that any modern school must produce and transmit. Bourdieu's 'realism' is actually a form of sociological *realpolitik* maintained within his commitment to a phenomenological epistemology (Robbins, 1991). It is not suggested that Bourdieu would accept the ontological realism (Bhaskar, 1993, Bunge, 1998) on which these observations are based, although there have been some interesting attempts to interpret Bourdieu as a 'critical realist' (Outhwaite, 1987, Fowler, 1996, Nash, 1999a).

The necessary character of the school has been studied most rigorously by Bernstein (1996). He argues that the school curriculum - even more than its modes of pedagogy and evaluation - is structured in such a way that access to its meanings is more or less confined to those who have mastered what he calls the 'elaborated' code. Hasan (1996), whose well-conducted studies of language genres have broadly substantiated the thesis on class associated speech forms, has commented directly on these deeply contested issues. In the first place, she found clear evidence that the practices of teachers do seem to be guided by the principles Bernstein has articulated

I believe that the sorts of perspectives typically needed for knowledge production are taught throughout schooling but they are taught invisibly. In analysing the language of the classroom in a picture-reading session in the first year of schooling in some suburban schools in Australia, I found ... that as early as the very first year of schooling, teachers already insisted on objective evidence; they rejected answers that were not explicitly supported by some evidence in the

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picture. They also rejected conclusions that were not logical; to be received with approval, conclusions had to be implicated in their reasoning; and the responses that the teachers favoured highly were those presented as universal generalisations (Hasan, 1996: 409).

This empirical evidence should be accepted: teachers do behave like this and they do so because they hold a theory of education that is basically correct. School knowledge has this character by virtue of the fact that only such forms of knowledge will give access to the structures of the real world. Hasan makes the case in these terms:

Are there no logical reasons for better valuing such higher mental functions as those of abstraction, generalisation, deductive reasoning, disembodied thinking and so on? Are these functions valued highly only because they are associated with the dominant codes? Or are they valued because they are the ultimate point in the programs of the development of the human mind, necessary for subjugating the environment? These questions throw long shadows, and it is my conviction that neither the sociology of knowledge nor its philosophy, neither the science of cognitive development nor of physics, have pursued these questions. This may be because no matter how we answer these questions, the answers are immensely disquieting and they certainly mock the facile pseudo revolutionary postures of many academics today (Hasan, 1996: 193).

The attack on 'facile' and 'pseudo revolutionary postures' testifies to the sharpness of the debate in this area, and also expresses the degree of irritation experienced by many realists, in the face of idealist positions. It is not, incidentally, the necessity of 'subjugating' the environment that makes 'elaborated' forms of thought so important. The task of understanding the world, for whatever purpose, is in itself entirely sufficient. If the nature of mass is such that it is equivalent to a given quantum of energy, then the abstract symbolic forms of that knowledge must be taught: whether one then makes bombs, builds power stations, or gains the satisfaction, sufficient unto itself, of knowing

what the world is like at that level, is a matter of social practice within an economy of certain kind.

### **Conclusion**

But what is Bourdieu's position? It is perhaps true to say that he does not make it especially easy to find out. There are sufficient clues, for example, in Bourdieu's references to the need for a 'universal pedagogy' (one designed to facilitate access for students with non-valorised *habitus* to the universal knowledge of the School), to indicate that he does have a sense of the scholastic necessary. However his views have always been expressed with great circumspection. There is, in fact, what might be called an ultra-left critique of Bourdieu as a 'deficit theorist' (Bisseret, 1979, Baudelot & Establet, 1981). His argument has been restated bluntly and unsympathetically, that '[t]he working classes are trapped in their habitus through cultural impoverishment and cultural difference' (Branson & Miller, 1991: 42), has been sharply criticised as a 'dark', 'determinist', and 'immutable formulation' (Mehan *et al.*, 1996: 216). It should also be noted that virtually everyone complains about Bourdieu's dense and highly euphemised style. Nevertheless, his employment of marxist terms, the powerful concepts of 'cultural capital' and 'symbolic violence', and his brisk dismissal of 'IQ racism', have gained for Bourdieu's work a general acceptance amongst radical sociologists of education.

It could be wrong to argue that Bourdieu's theory has undergone a conscious revision. His thought has always been multi-layered, subtle, and free of an over-scholastic dedication to 'consistency'. Never the less a definite change of emphasis can be detected in recent works. Bourdieu himself notes that the most influential contemporary theories of social differences in education - which have a certain 'radical' genesis - now reject the once dominant psychological perspective in favour of 'structural' alternatives:

Factors that seem 'natural', like talent or taste, give way to poorly defined social factors such as the inadequacies of the educational system or the inability and incompetence of the teachers (whom parents increasingly hold responsible for

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their children's poor results), or, even more confusedly, to the logic of a completely deficient system in need of an overhaul (Bourdieu, 1999: 422).

Many followers of Bourdieu will not be amused by these comments - although the irony is rather delicious. He suggests that those, not least among them teachers, who once maintained the conventional view that educational inequality was the result of 'natural gifts' or intelligence, and so on, have now adopted a different position. There is no denying that Bourdieu has shifted his ground: he *did* argue that the School recognises the *habitus* of the dominant class as legitimate, regards those who lack this *cultural capital* as ineducable by want of innate intelligence, and systematically excludes them by a process of neglect. And he *did*, moreover, argue that the educational system, characterised by *misrecognition* on a massive scale, should be subjected to constant critique and reform. Nor has he abandoned that critique. This account of 'Bourdieuian' theory and practice has been the stable currency of sociology of education courses for more than a decade. His comments suggest, however, that what many have been taught is not a *method of practice*, but merely a formal and general 'sociological' account of 'reproduction', with its diagrammed circles of determinism, having little substantive explanatory power and incapable of recognising social change. The constant reiteration of the 'internalised odds' thesis by 'Bourdieuians' who have failed to notice that, '[t]here will be no return to those social universes in which the quasi-perfect coincidence between objective tendencies and subjective expectations made the experience of the world a continuous interlocking of confirmed expectations' (Bourdieu, 2000: 234), is only made possible by a misreading that privileged *theory* over *method*. When working-class students, particularly those from certain dominated ethnic groups, started to maintain extraordinarily high aspirations, this theoretical truth was made false. So has Bourdieu come to protest at last that he is not a 'Bourdieuian'.

No one wants to return to the 'deficit' theories of 30 or 40 years ago, which, focusing only on practices and ignoring the structural conditions of their production, seemed to 'blame the victim' and exonerate the oppressor. Apple sounds the now familiar note of the scholar-activist:

many of our political “leaders” ... have set out, aggressively, to drag down a people, while at the same time attacking the poor and the disenfranchised for their supposed lack of values and character ... my anger begins to show ... but if we cannot allow ourselves to be angry about the lives of our children, what can we be angry about? (Apple 1995: 23).

What is being witnessed here, as much as anything else as Bourdieu's work has helped to demonstrate, is the struggle for distinction in an academic field where radical credentials, are as important - if, indeed, not more important - as the act of scholarship itself. There are ideological barriers that inhibit discussion about social realities. These can be suppressed only at the risk of provoking precisely the consequence of all such repression, that is their symptomatic expression in a disguised and more dangerous form at other sites:

it is difficult to talk about the dominated in an accurate and realistic way without seeming either to crush them or to exalt them' (Bourdieu, 2000: 233-234).

Within Bourdieu's approach it is actually pointless to oppose dispositional ('psychological') theories to structural ('sociological') theories, for his entire argument has the form of a structure-disposition-practice model. As Bourdieu has allowed himself to say, albeit in a passage that has been stripped bare of its masking euphemisms,

the ability to produce a complex chain of logical reasoning or the ability to accomplish a perfectly rigorous moral act ... remain the privilege of only a few because these anthropological potentialities find their full realisation only under definite social and economic conditions ... one cannot, at the same time, denounce the inhuman social conditions imposed upon proletarians ... and credit the people placed in such situations with the full accomplishment of their human potentialities (Bourdieu, 1998: 136).

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‘This may seem only a whisker away from the once conventional sociological theories of “lower-class behaviour”’ (Roach, 1967). It is significant that Bourdieu has felt the need to ‘bend the stick’, as he likes to say, in order to express dissent from the ‘simplistic rhetoric of resistance’, post-modernist relativism, and ‘populist illusions’ in general, now so common in orthodox discourse (Bourdieu, 2000: 233). The relationships between social class, the possession of literate resources, the generation of effective cognitive ability through specialised socialisation practices, and the achievement of literacy by children, being real states of affairs and processes, continue to exist even when ignored. It may be an unpopular idea that some children, because of the way they are brought up in their early years, are more *intelligent* than others. They possess specific skills of abstract conceptual analysis *necessarily* recognised by the School, so that Social differences in school attainment inevitably follow. However Bourdieu seems to be suggesting that that hypothesis should not be dismissed out of hand. Apple (1995: 26) argues that oppressive social conditions have produced ‘lives that are devoid of hope for meaningful mobility because of what might best be called the pornography of poverty’. Despair, fatalism, and limited ambitions are, as a matter of fact, dispositions characteristic to a narrative of life formed as one response to their situation. It is only a small step, although one perhaps yet beyond the permitted boundaries of radical polemic, to examine also the real consequences of social oppression on conceptual development.

It is for these reasons, no doubt, that Bourdieu sounds a related protest against certain explanations of inequality in access to education:

[i]t is essential to checkmate explanations whose highly fantastic nature would be immediately apparent if they did not awaken the oldest phantasms of the Western tradition (Bourdieu 1993: 187).

For what is it that we - we that is who are intellectuals of the dominant class and the dominant race - fear most in the reception of our thought? It is precisely that we might be perceived as numbered among those who accept the dominant order of our society. To that extent, if no more, it is to be complicit in its regime of oppression. And so we spend

our lives, and attempt to win all our public respect, subjecting the 'system' and its 'structures' to a relentless critique. How can we not distance ourselves in every symbolic action from the tainted 'deficit theory' of our unreconstructed history? And yet, all the fear and guilt of a racist and colonial past – a past ever in our present – should not be grounds sufficient to abandon a common sense grasp of the actual nature of the world.

These comments, of course, are addressed to a group to which not all readers will belong. It is for such readers to examine what constraints lie on their own intellectual practice. But these comments may help us all - as teachers and intellectuals in whatever field of practice - to understand the complexities of Bourdieu.

Comments welcome

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