

Bourdieu, Pierre (1930–2002)

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Throughout the world, Pierre Bourdieu (1930–2002) is the best-known French sociologist (after Durkheim) and the most cited French social thinker (after Foucault). Part of his gigantic influence within the social sciences comes from his exemplary integration of theoretical reflection and empirical research. As he puts it, paraphrasing Kant, “research without theory is blind, and theory without research is empty” (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 162). Throughout his intellectual trajectory, Bourdieu does not simply defend this thesis; he illustrates it. The general concepts in his theory of the social world have been formulated and honed in investigations of a diverse array of phenomena: from law to photography, from religion to unemployment, from science to the housing market, from the formation of the modern state to impressionistic painting. As he carried out sociological research on these themes, he refined his theoretical depiction of the fundamental structures and processes of the social world, captured through notions such as habitus, field, capital, and symbolic violence. Bourdieu’s research on varied topics offered a firm foundation for his theoretical generalizations, by showing that different social spheres are similar in their structure and functioning (e.g., despite the different stakes in the fields of art, religion, and science, all three are spaces of competition for a specific form of symbolic capital of prestige and authority). Conversely, the more Bourdieu’s conceptual apparatus was applied in his sociological investigations, the greater became his confidence in its applicability to new phenomena. A brief glance at any contemporary journal of sociology will

show that such new applications continue to be undertaken by countless researchers throughout the globe.

Coming from a rural village in the province, Bourdieu “moved up” to Paris in the 1950s to study philosophy at the prestigious École Normale Supérieure (1949–1954). He became a self-taught anthropologist-cum-sociologist during his military service (1955–1957) and teaching activities (1957–1961) in Algeria. Between 1966 and 1974, Bourdieu had already developed his (meta)theoretical foundations for a total science of the social world. He worked intensely on the sociology of education and culture in the 1970s, analyzing the role of symbolic classifications in the legitimation and reproduction of class asymmetries. He was named professor at the Collège de France in 1981, and took on a more open stance as a public intellectual in the social struggles against neoliberalism in the 1990s. Bourdieu’s unlikely trajectory, which took him from a dominated social and regional background into the apex of French academic life, introduced a painful fracture in his way of being (a “cleft habitus”). He gives testimony of this internal splitting, typical of persons who undergo abrupt transitions between social classes, in his exercise of sociological self-analysis (Bourdieu, 2008 [2004]). His disciplinary journey from philosophy to the social sciences has also resulted in a style of thinking that imports philosophical concepts into sociological research (e.g., what are schoolteachers’ “categories of understanding?”), but also resorts to sociological methods in order to answer philosophical questions (e.g., what are the social-historical conditions that allow for “disinterested” scientific research or a “pure aesthetics”?). Bourdieu’s sociological framework is keen on capturing the dialectical relation between the objective and subjective dimensions of the social world (“the social made into a thing” and “the social made into a body”; 1990 [1987]: 191). His attempt to overcome objectivist and subjectivist modes of social knowledge by means of a “structural praxeology” provided the basis, in turn, for his critical depiction of how structures

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2

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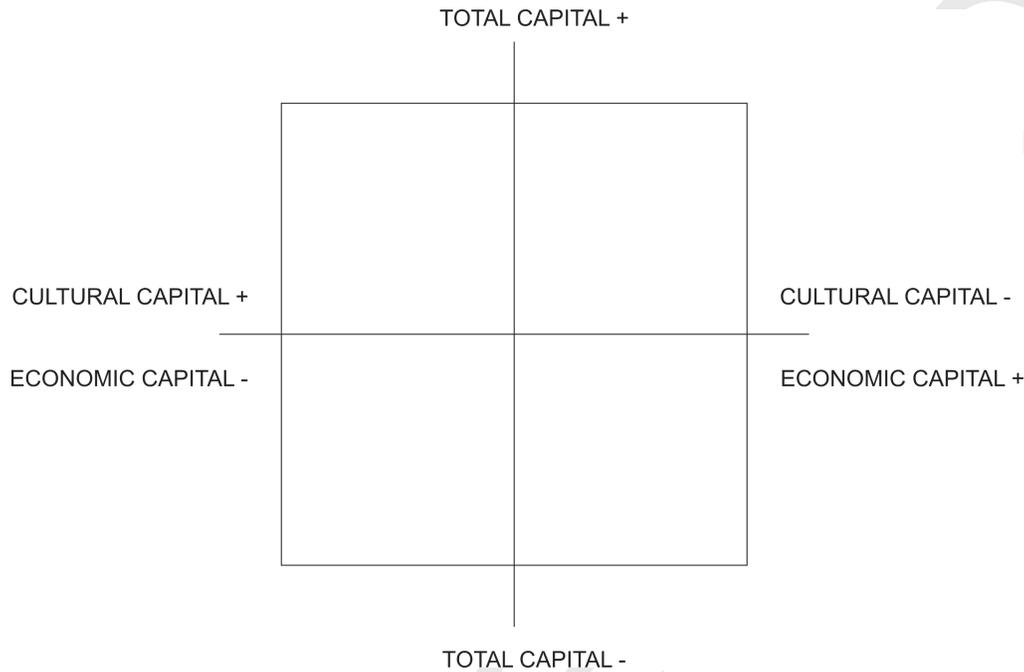


Figure 1 The social space.

of domination are historically reproduced in the daily practices of the agents socialized in their midst.

Founder of *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, a heterodox avant-garde journal that has functioned since 1975 as the main body of the Bourdieusian school, Bourdieu published more than 30 books and 400 articles (Delsaut and Rivière, 2002). Among his most important and well-known books, one may single out *Reproduction* (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977 [1970]), *Distinction* (Bourdieu 1984 [1979]), *The Logic of Practice* (Bourdieu, 1990 [1980]), and *Pascalian Meditations* (Bourdieu, 2001 [1997]). Among the more accessible introductions for noninitiated readers are various collections of talks and interviews (Bourdieu, 1993 [1981], 1990 [1987]; Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992) and, especially, his courses at the Collège de France (Bourdieu, 2015–2016), which are currently in process of publication (10 volumes planned). There are countless handbooks, books, journal symposiums, commemorative volumes, dictionaries, and blog posts dedicated to his work. Only a *Journal of Bourdieusian Studies* is missing! Loïc Wacquant, Louis Pinto, Bernard Lahire, Derek

Robbins, Rogers Brubaker, David Swartz, and Nick Crossley are among the best commentators and critics.

Within the field of global social science, Bourdieu's critical sociology has become more than classical; it is hegemonic. Although everything separates him from Talcott Parsons's structural functionalism, Bourdieu's influence is comparable to that enjoyed by the former within the social sciences in the postwar period. Nowadays, in Paris as in New Delhi or São Paulo, sociology students know and quote his central concepts: "field," "habitus," "cultural capital," and "symbolic violence." Indeed, within a scattered discipline such as sociology, the lexicon of his critical praxeology offers a common language for dialogue not only among social scientists, but also among sociologists and anthropologists (and, to a lesser extent, philosophers, historians, statisticians, economists, literary scholars, etc.). Furthermore, Bourdieu's international influence is so great that one can even reconstruct the recent history of sociology by aligning different authors in terms of how they appropriate or confront his legacy. For instance, Luc Boltanski, Laurent Thévenot, Margaret Archer, Michèle Lamont, Nathalie

Heinich, and Loïc Wacquant have all worked with Bourdieu in Paris. Axel Honneth, Bernard Lahire, and Georg Steinmetz have developed their own theories by direct inspiration, while Bruno Latour, Alain Caillé, Jacques Rancière, and Jeffrey Alexander have taken a decidedly oppositional stance towards critical sociology. Bourdieu has been criticized for his scientism, sociologism, determinism, materialism, reductionism, and utilitarianism. In any case, “thinking with Bourdieu against Bourdieu” (Passeron) is the formula that makes sociology go forward.

The appeal of Bourdieu’s sociology stems from the “ontological shock” his writings provoke in the reader. Faced with hitherto unsuspected connections between individual subjectivities and broad social forces, the reader feels that these writings speak not only of herself, but also of her partner, her friends, and so forth. Bourdieu’s insight into the links between “biography and history” (Mills) springs from a methodical objectivation of the relational space in which agents are embedded, which systematically explains their ways of acting, thinking, feeling, perceiving, classifying, evaluating, speaking – in sum, their ways of being – by the social position they occupy. The reader recognizes herself in his Proustian descriptions of the social world, while at the same she experiences her own “interiority” as traversed by such objective forces. In reading Bourdieu’s oeuvre, the objectivation of each person’s lifeworld through the lens of a sociology of conflict, which reveals the subtle workings of power and conceives of the world as a competitive and stratified world ordered by mechanisms of domination, is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, the relentlessness of his theoretical and empirical grasping of domination stuns; on the other, it triggers a moral indignation towards social injustices and inequalities that inspires further analyses of domination in its multiple forms. The paradoxical result, typical of any critical theory, is that scientific objectivation propels simultaneously the feeling of alienation and the will to resist. A social world structured around distributive inequalities and power asymmetries, which the agent once experienced as the natural and self-evident order of things, is shown to be the product of ideological naturalization. As the agent realizes that the social environment she once perceived as “natural”

appears as such due to her socialization, which endowed her with schemes of perception attuned to her conditions of existence, she can apprehend them as historically contingent and, thus, politically transformable. Similarly, although there is an inescapably “disenchanted” vein in the realization of the social determinisms that impinge deeply upon one’s own subjectivity, this same realization may foster an ethical–political attempt to free oneself from them (at least to some extent).

The seductive power of Bourdieu’s work among sociologists and anthropologists is largely due to the fact that he consistently submits theoretical reflection to the constraints of empirical field research, where he combines a variety of qualitative and quantitative methods (ethnography, interviews, statistics) in order to trace the operations of power in everyday life. Philosophically, Bourdieu draws on the historical epistemology of Bachelard and Canguilhem, Cassirer’s philosophy of symbolic forms, and Wittgenstein’s philosophy of language so as to overcome the opposition between Lévi-Strauss’s and Althusser’s structuralisms and the existential phenomenologies of Sartre and Merleau-Ponty. While structuralism is correctly attentive to the social-structural influences upon individual conduct, which often operate below their conscious awareness, it neglects that the product of socialization is not a passive matter but a dynamic agent, imbued with strategic interests and creative competences. Sociologically, Bourdieu incorporates reflections from the founders of sociology (Marx, Weber, Durkheim) within an original synthesis that revises and specifies the approach of each one by playing them against each other. Thus, for instance, Marx’s theory of ideology is reformulated with the tools of Durkheim’s “sociological Kantianism”: relations of domination come to be perceived and reproduced as “natural” because agents experience them according to subjective structures shaped by those very relations. Weber complements the picture not only through his concern with how domination comes to be deemed socially legitimate, but also by showing that competition for scarce resources extends to nonmaterial or symbolic goods (“glory, honour, credit, reputation, fame”; Bourdieu, 2001 [1997]: 166). Therefore, Bourdieu is simultaneously the heir of the Durkheimian school (lineage:

Durkheim–Mauss–Lévi-Strauss), of Weber's sociology (lineage: Weber–Mannheim–Elias), and of Marxist sociology (lineage: Marx–Althusser–Poulantzas). The result is a dialectical theory of practices that skillfully overcomes the opposition between agency and structure by means of a fine articulation between the concepts of field, habitus, practices, and symbolic violence.

To properly understand the genetic structuralism that underpins Bourdieu's critical sociology, it is important to reconstruct the architecture of his general approach, as long as one keeps in mind that its "axiomatic" principles are meant to be translated into practical operations of empirical research. One may discern three moments that put Bourdieu's theoretical framework into motion and guide his scientific reasoning: the theory of sociological knowledge; the metatheory of genetic structuralism; and the sociological theory of the production, circulation, and consumption of cultural goods. While the theory of sociological knowledge develops the epistemological principles of a relational sociology of the social space, the metatheory of genetic structuralism connects social structure and cultural practices through a dialectical articulation between the concepts of field, habitus, practice, and symbolic violence. When applied to culture in the broadest sense of the term, the system of concepts results in an impressive series of historical and empirical surveys of fields and subfields of competition for symbolic goods. Together, the three moments constitute Bourdieu's theory of the social world in all its splendor.

In a first (philosophical) moment, one breaks with commonsense beliefs about the social world and with the substantialist thinking of spontaneous sociology, which privileges visible, immediately observable phenomena (e.g., a homeless person asking a passing lawyer for a spare change) over the invisible structures that explain them (e.g., the class structure in which both are positioned). This "epistemological break" with common sense (Bourdieu, Chamboredon, and Passeron, 1991 [1968]) replaces substantialism with the structural-relational method of thought, and construes the scientific fact as a set of internal relations between entities that form a system. The transition from epistemology to sociology is accomplished in a topology of the social space (field of social classes) and in a

theory of fields (relatively autonomous cultural subsystems). The field is a system of relations between different social positions, which are defined by the unequal distribution of efficient power resources within that space. As the starting point of analysis, the field is construed by the sociologist in order to explain a set of practices affected by its forces (e.g., a scientist's experiment in a laboratory can only be made intelligible in relation to other scientists and institutions operating in the same field). Combining his relational and topological reasoning to an agonistic view of the social world as a space of competition for scarce resources, Bourdieu underlines that these resources assume socially diverse forms: from money to religious charisma, from artistic celebrity to scientific authority. Bourdieu generalizes the Marxian concept of "capital" to refer to any possession, material or nonmaterial, that functions as an efficient means to the exercise of power within a given social universe. In modern class society, Bourdieu distinguishes between three main types of capital (economic, cultural, and social) that allow for a specification of the notion of social position. Each position in the field is defined by the specific capital that the agents possess, as well as by the volume (total economic and cultural capital) and the structure (the ratio between the types of capital) of the different species of capital. Applying correspondence analysis, a mathematical technique that operationalizes the relational mode of thinking, the researcher obtains a graphic representation of the spatial positions of the social field with the dominant class above, itself divided by an opposition between its dominant fraction (high economic capital) and its dominated fraction (high cultural capital), and the dominated, so-called "popular" classes below. This graphic representation of the social space is so common that it serves somehow as a kind of totemic emblem for the clan of Bourdieusians.

If the notion of field constitutes the objectivist moment of analysis, the Aristotelian–Thomistic notion of habitus corresponds to its subjectivist moment. The social positions within a field are occupied by individual and/or collectives. They are the ones who animate the structure. However, in order for them to be able to do it, the system of positions (field) must sediment into a "system of dispositions" (habitus) that both propel and

enable the agent to intervene upon the social world, to participate in one of its “games.” As a presence of the field within the agents, the habitus represents the internalization or incorporation of a system of positions in the form of a system of practical dispositions. This system contains both a volitional and a capability dimension. The first refers to the specific “interests” that impel agents to engage with the social world, the socially formed “illusio” that leads them to invest their time, energy, and resources in the pursuit of a desired good (e.g., entrepreneurial success or literary prestige). The second designates the practical abilities that enable these same agents to act more or less effectively upon social life (e.g., the “practical sense” required to compete in the philosophical field, which is obviously very different from the skills involved in competitive bodybuilding). Both the habitus and the field are invisible as such; they are constructed by the sociologist in order to causally explain the production of empirical practices. Thus, by connecting objective positions (field) to subjective dispositions (habitus), which together produce social actions (practices), one goes from mechanistic explanation to a quasi-finalistic interpretation of action. Quasi, since in the adaptation of dispositions to social positions, “everything happens as if” individuals acted with consciousness and will. This explains why social actions can be objectively strategic even though they do not stem from conscious strategizing, as when, for instance, the spontaneous eloquence of a speaker serves as a distinctive social marker without any conscious attempt at distinction on her part. As a product of socialization, the habitus exists both in the head as “mental structures” (categories of perception, classification and evaluation) and in the body as “incorporated structures” (behavioral schemes and motor principles of action). Produced by the system of social positions, the habitus is, therefore, a system of subjective-practical mediation between society and the individual, a socially generated and socially generative principle of practices that reproduce in its effects, but not intentionally, the social structure. In a classic formulation that contemporary sociologists know by heart, Bourdieu defines the habitus as a system of

endurable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring

structures, that is, as principles which generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary in order to attain them. (Bourdieu, 1990 [1980]: 53)

If the circular relation between the field and the habitus appears more often in Bourdieu as a relation of reproduction rather than of transformation, it is because he interspersed the concepts of “power” and “symbolic violence” with those of habitus and practices. The theory of symbolic violence apprehends the mechanism through which agents, by perceiving the social world according to mental schemes that spring from this same world, experience their life conditions not as the setting of arbitrary inequalities, but rather as the natural and evident order of things. By expressing in a sublimated fashion the interests of the dominant classes that hold power, symbolic power renders domination invisible for those who suffer it, thus obtaining their complicity – since the world as it appears to them as both natural and legitimate.

Now that we have seen how the structural-relational mode of thought leads to the notion of field, and how Bourdieu ties the later notion to the ones of habitus, practice, and symbolic violence, we finally arrive at the heart of his manifold empirical investigations of the production, circulation, and consumption of cultural goods in a class society. These studies take the form of a rigorous analysis of the fields of religion, education, sports, science, philosophy, art, literature, economy, politics, law, journalism, and so on. Such fields of symbolic production, which have become relatively autonomous in the course of history, are located within the upper region of the social space (high volume of capital) and offer an alternative to the Marxist “short-circuit” that connects society’s base to its superstructure directly. In an attempt to overcome the dichotomy between “internalist” and “externalist” analyses of symbolic products, Bourdieu has shown that fields mediate the external influences that impinge upon them in accordance with their own autonomous logic. For instance, a novelist’s class position within the broader social space can only help in the explanation of her creations if one considers how her class conditionings are “refracted” by forces stemming from the artistic field and the

creator's position within its structure. On the one hand, Bourdieu connects the space of the works (monuments and documents, philosophical and literary texts, etc.) with the structural setting of their production (the relatively autonomous field). On the other hand, by apprehending fields of forces as fields of struggles, Bourdieu's historical studies of the multiple fields and subfields of culture invariably demonstrate agents' strategies and power interests that aim at the conservation or the transformation of the structure of the field – or even of the whole society.

From the earliest texts on Algeria to his last interventions in the public sphere, Bourdieu has not only analyzed the positions, dispositions, and stances of social agents, but has also taken a stance against all forms of social injustice and inequality, with a special eye to those routinely made invisible by mechanisms of ideological masking. His hyperagonistic view of social life can thus be seen as a scientific “sublimation” of his ethical sensitivity. And, if considered through the prism of an “optimism of the will,” his “pessimism of intellect” is a preparatory task for the ethical and political work of giving human agents “some means of doing what they do, and living what they live, a little bit better” (2008 [2004]: 113).

SEE ALSO: **Relationism**; Theory Construction; Structuralism; Practice Theories; Habitus/Field; Social Capital; Symbolic Capital; Distinction; **Taste**; Domination; **Topology**; Low Culture and High Culture; Symbolic Classification; **Cultural Reproduction and Cultural Capital**

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