

# Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture

*Second edition*



Pierre Bourdieu  
& Jean-Claude Passeron

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The way in which the ruling ideas of a social system are related to structures of class, production and power, and how these are legitimated and perpetuated, is fundamental to the sociological project. In this second edition of this classic text, which includes a new introduction by Pierre Bourdieu, the authors develop an analysis of education (in its broadest sense, encompassing more than the process of formal education). They show how education carries an essentially arbitrary cultural scheme which is actually, though not in appearance, based on power. More widely, the reproduction of culture through education is shown to play a key part in the reproduction of the whole social system. The analysis is carried through not only in theoreti

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### **Joyride says**

Un muy buen libro para criticar y pensar el sistema educativo, los métodos de selección y un análisis más complejo en torno a la escuela como un sistema reproductor de las jerarquías sociales, aunque el discurso es bastante complicado.

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### **Joe says**

A bit mind numbing... Maybe it's the French translation...

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### **Mike Mena says**

This is a difficult book to critique, literally. I do not recommend this to anyone that is not totally and completely familiar with Bourdieu (and probably Field Theory) already, although, anything is possible! The first part of book is dense but rich and one of the best illustrations of Symbolic Violence I've read so far (I've read about 10 Bourdieu books). What was perhaps most illuminating was dislodging the idea of a "circular" reproduction--it just isn't that simple. As usual, the book is typically genius.

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### **Bob says**

hard for me to read. Written in a real Greek logic style or like a theorem or something

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### **Trevor says**

Sorry - this one is absurdly long:

"That's true what Harry says. You can tell a true gentleman from a false one that's just dressed in finery. Take yourself, sir. It's not just the cut of your clothes, nor is it even the fine way you've got of speaking. There's something else that marks you out as a gentleman. Hard to put your finger on it, but it's plain for all to see that's got eyes."

This quote, from *Remains of the Day*, has been hovering about me for the last week or so while I've been reading this book. Not so much that particular quote, but really this one – as this is the one I remembered from the book:

"I say, I hope you don't think me very rude. But you aren't a manservant of some sort, are you?" I must confess, my overwhelming feeling on hearing this was one of relief.

"I am indeed, sir. In fact, I am the butler of Darlington Hall, near Oxford."

I've started here as these two quotes sum up my reading of Reproduction – the reproduction of social structure, in so many ways, is defined by how we can tell who is 'a gentleman', how we can tell who is 'one of us'. When the doctor decides that the manservant isn't 'the man' – when he identifies where the manservant fits into the social universe – everyone can be happy and even relieved. But what signs have been used to identify, to out, this particular manservant? – This is a fascinating question, because to be a manservant has meant a lifetime of experience in correct behaviour, and yet even this has not been enough for him to pass in front of someone who knows.

When I was studying Italian one of my teachers told me that Italians have a word they use for foreigners who speak their language 'too well' – I can't remember the word, but remember it means 'bookishly over-learned'. These speakers are 'too correct' in their usage of the language and it is this hyper-correctness that makes them stand out.

Bourdieu is seeking to explain why the education system tends to favour candidates from certain classes. We like to think of the democratisation of the education system that has occurred over the last hundred years or so. We like to think of our society as a meritocracy. Even our popular philosophers are given hours of publicly funded air time to present their views in a beautifully filmed BBC documentaries seeking to explain to the *hoi polloi* why we might suffer from status anxiety – given that in the meritocracy in which we all live, we ourselves must be completely to blame for our relative success and failure. If the rich and well-connected do well at university, well, surely that shows their worthiness to rule in our perfect society – they have passed various and numerous objective test to display their worth and thereby proven themselves worthy of our awe.

But what if the system is not quite as objective as this story would suggest? What if the system was, in fact, rigged so that those from a certain class were many, many times more likely to succeed than those from certain other classes. As Bourdieu himself says, this is a particularly subtle illusion:

"This privileged instrument of the bourgeois sociodicy (the education system) which confers on the privileged the supreme privilege of not seeing themselves as privileged manages the more easily to convince the disinherited that they owe their scholastic and social destiny to their lack of gifts or merits, because in matters of culture absolute dispossession excludes awareness of being dispossessed."

And isn't that the worst of all fates? Not only to be cheated, but then to be blamed for what has been denied you.

By the early 1960s the bulge of post-war babies were making their way through the French education system. There was much talk of the democratisation of the education system as, in absolute terms, more people from working and middle class families were making their way through the maze of higher education. This was seen as a major social shift and one that was doing much to provide a new level of 'fairness' to French society.

Bourdieu provides a fascinating graph in this book – one that immediately calls into question this whole vision of a revolutionary shift in who gets an education and who does not. It shows that despite the increase in the absolute numbers of people from the various classes who are now able to attend university, their relative proportions have remained constant. The bar graph he reproduces in this book shows two sets of figures for each of the social classes defined from rural working class kids through to Parisian upper class ones. Each bar of this graph has increased over time, but the overall shape of the graph is exactly what it had

previously been.

Bourdieu's main point is that the educational system is one of the main tools used to replicate the class system. Education does this through a number of different means, but it is supported in this task through expectations:

“Depending on whether access to higher education is collectively felt, even in a diffuse way, as an impossible, possible, probable, normal or banal future, everything in the conduct of families and the children (particularly their conduct and performance at school) will vary, because behaviour tends to be governed by what is ‘reasonable’ to expect.”

If only around one percent of students from rural families end up with a university degree, then the reasonable expectation is not for educational success, but rather its opposite. However, he shows that for the children of the wealthiest in society the expectation that they will go to university and excel is increasingly seen as part of their birth right. And this translates into virtually all of them going to university.

The point being that education has increasingly been used as a means of displaying distinction – a cultural means of displaying social distinction most of all. It is today very rare indeed for people, even in the lowest levels of administration, to not have an undergraduate degree. Distinction today depends on where you qualify (which university you went to) and what postgraduate studies you completed. All of this takes time, and time takes money. Being able to afford both has always been a preferred method of justifying social distinctions that seem as if they have been decided purely on the basis of merit, but rather have been chosen on the basis of inheritance. Inheritance in the old sense of inheritance of the financial wherewithal and inheritance in the form of social and cultural capital that make success virtually inevitable.

“In the US, for example, statistics show a continuous increase in the proportion of members of the ruling categories who are graduates, and graduates of the best universities, a tendency which has become more marked in recent years.”

Bourdieu also points out that those who like to talk about the democratisation of the education system generally like to look at data viewed from the most general level, the most aggregated figures – that is, all students enrolled in university, for example, rather than breaking this data down to class, sex or rural/urban or then by types of subjects studied. How often have we heard that today females are outperforming males in education due to more females being enrolled or earning degrees from universities? The duplicity of this lie is made clear when one looks at what these women are becoming qualified in and what these qualifications enable them to do.

“Thus, in France, the fact that the chances of university entrance are virtually the same for boys and girls does not imply the disappearance of the traditional model of the division of labour and the ideology of the distribution of ‘gifts’ between the sexes: girls are still consigned more often than boys to certain types of studies (Arts subjects in the main), the more so the lower their social origin. Even indicators as unequivocal at first sight as the proportion of women graduates making vocational use of their academic qualifications are subject to the system effect: to measure adequately the social profitability of the diploma held by a woman, one must at least take into account the fact that the ‘value’ of an occupation (such as, in France, that of primary or secondary school teacher) steadily diminishes as it is feminised.”

And what is true for females you can expect will be equally true of working class and rural youth of both sexes. What is interesting is the way the education system makes it seem natural that the rich will end up studying law and medicine and the working class will end up studying arts or sciences. Bourdieu is at his

ironic best when he says:

“Blessed, then, are ‘modest’ folk who, when all is said and done, aspire in their modesty to nothing but what they have; and praise be to ‘the social order’ which refuses to hurt them by calling them to over-ambitious destinies, as little suited to their abilities as to their aspirations.

“Is Dr Pangloss less terrifying as a planner than as a metaphysician?”

(The illusion here is to Voltaire’s Dr Pangloss – someone seeking to convince Candide, by increasingly difficult acts of mental gymnastics, that he lives in the best of all possible worlds).

How does the system so effortlessly reproduce the social classes? This has been a question that has been troubling me for most of this year. However, Bourdieu has a remarkably interesting solution. Bernstein claimed that the differences between the classes were mostly realised as differences in speech habits between them – with the working class being constrained by their highly context dependent language and the upper classes being context independent and therefore ‘the universal man’.

Bourdieu criticises this view as it implies there are objective reasons – based in a kind of ignorance of something worth knowing – that, if the working class could only learn they too could end their role as outcasts and under-achievers. Bourdieu says that most of the differences are not differences of such an objective kind – rather they are differences in taste and confidence:

“The opposition between these two types of relation to language stems from the opposition between the two modes of acquiring verbal mastery, the exclusively scholastic acquisition which condemns the acquirer to a ‘scholastic’ relation to scholastic language and the mode of acquisition through insensible familiarisation, which alone can fully produce the practical mastery of language and culture that authorises cultivated allusion and cultured complicity.”

That is, school expects a kind of habit of mind and a tone that is habitual for the upper classes, but that is likewise alien for the lower classes. While the upper classes speak this language effortlessly – and are even able to play with it – the lower classes always use it in a way that shows the effort they must exert in using it.

“...this is because the relation to culture it recognises is fully mastered only when the culture it inculcates has been acquired by familiarisation; it is also because the mode of inculcation that the system sets up remains, despite its relative autonomy, continuous with the mode of inculcation of legitimate culture for which the social conditions are only ever given to families whose culture is the culture of the dominant classes. It can be seen, first, that in not explicitly giving what it demands, the system demands uniformity of all its students that they should have what it does not give, i.e. the relation to language and culture exclusively produced by a particular mode of inculcation.”

And not just uniformity, but uniformity to something the system itself does not actually teach.

“Rhetorical devices, expressive effects, nuances of pronunciation, melody of intonation, registers of diction or forms of phraseology by no means solely express the conscious choices of a speaker preoccupied with the originality of his expression (as a summary reading of the opposition between *langue* and *parole* qua execution might suggest): all these stylistic features always betray, in the very utterance, a relation to language which is common to a whole category of speakers because it is the product of the social conditions of the acquisition and use of language. Thus the avoidance of the everyday expression and the search for the rare turn of phrase which characterises the relation to language of professional practitioners of writing and

difference through writing maintain with language, are only the extreme form of the literary disposition towards language which is proper to the privileged classes, who are inclined to make the choice of language and the manner of its use a means of excluding the vulgar and thereby affirming their distinction."

One of the most remarkable examples of the differences in how working class, middle class and upper class people use language is shown in this (again, extended, sorry) quote:

" Among the remarks made on the term gerophangie it is easy to distinguish two phraseologies betokening two relations to language (M = male, F = female, P = Paris, p = provinces, Wo = working class, Mi = middle class, Up – upper class): 'I don't know the definition' (M p Wo). 'Means nothing to me' (F p Mi). 'Gero (perhaps old?); phagy: act of eating; so someone who eats old people? (subject to correction)' (M p Mi). 'The etymology seems to indicate the fact of eating the old' (F p Mi). These responses, expressing either lucidity or scholastic prudence, or more precisely the desire to 'do one's best' to make use of one's knowledge within the bounds of scholastic prudence, contrast with another phraseology peremptory, arrogant, off-hand or recherché: 'The etymology is as follows (...) Gerophagy is there the custom of eating the aged among certain non-Promethean clansmen' (M P Up). 'If gero comes from geras, an old man, then gerophagy designates a form of anthropophagy preferentially oriented towards the older elements of population X' (F P Up) 'Formed from the aorist of -, to eat; the consumption of old people, a practice encountered among certain primitive tribes' (F P Mi) 'The eating of gero as in the eating of anthropo' (M P Up)."

The joke here being that Bourdieu set up this test – he asked students to define a series of words and 'gerophangie' was one word he made up – it having no etymology other than his own creation. The differences between the working class students who had no idea what the word might mean and the upper class students who created etymologies for the word (and even anthropological histories of the non-Promethean societies supposed to have practiced this act) could hardly be starker.

The point is not so much what you know, it is the naturalness by which you display what you know – and display is all.

This is a disturbing book – one that dissipates hope that education is the answer to social inequity. However, what it does best is dispel the myth of our meritocracy – and in that this book provides a service we ought to be infinitely grateful for.

If there is a great problem with this book and it comes down to a quote I only remember the gist of now by Terry Eagleton – the problem with too many social commentators seeking to provide a critique of the existing order is that they write in a manner that remains completely unreadable by those they are supposedly seeking to liberate. The actual quote was much more pithy – but that is what it meant and its meaning could hardly be more relevant to this book. God, it was hard going. This is a text that resists efforts to understand it – which is a pity as what it has to say is so very important.

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### **Alan Medina says**

The theory is actually interesting, but the writing style is what makes me loathe this book. I found it quite repetitive, the author really likes to start any paragraph with a resume of the previous one... I had read it seconds ago, no necessary reason to start with the same reason all over again. I had read other books related

to education but this one is certainly the most annoying one I've ever had to study from.

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