

“The more things change the more they stay the same”

Using Bourdieu to understand the contradictions of change

History repeats itself, first as tragedy, second as farce –
Karl Marx (1852)

MANY OF THE points I will be raising in this paper are provocations, ways of trying to think differently in a time when history appears to be repeating itself neither solely as tragedy nor solely as farce, but rather as a farcical tragedy. It seems strange to talk about how things remain the same when the world around us seems to be subject to unpredictable, precipitous, even brutal changes. Yet, I want to argue that change is often a requirement for maintaining enduring power imbalances.

This is a very personal talk. As a 76-year-old I am looking back over a period of 20 years as a school teacher, and 35 years as an academic. Over the course of that period many many aspects of social and economic life have changed, yet despite all that change, key power dynamics have remained the same. I have been a political activist for 60 years, ever since I stood at the age of 16 as the socialist candidate in my selective girls' school's mock elections. I achieved 11 votes out of over 100 cast. So being on the losing side is one thing that has not changed in my trajectory. I think an honest appraisal would recognise that, for the most part, for much of my life, I have been acting to no avail. I have changed myself, and my circumstances but the wider economic and political power imbalances and inequalities I have spent a lifetime challenging, still endure.

Currently we have a tsunami of inequitable power imbalances sweeping away the rights and entitlements of the working classes but also those of the less economically secure middle classes. For 10 years I shared with one of my sisters the care of my mother who was living with, or rather dying from, dementia. And it feels as if the world is suffering from collective dementia, an almost universal forgetting of lessons from the past. When all her words and thinking had disappeared my mother was left with only emotions, mainly anger, abjection, and an abiding sense of reproof directed at my sister and I. Those who have been robbed of their agency, dignity and self-esteem, for example, the working classes in the US and the UK, are similarly simmering with rage

and resentment at the way they have been treated. But the contempt in which they are held, and the unfair treatment they suffer is another continuity. We have always had the domination, exploitation and oppression of the many by the few.

The working classes have always been disposable. In *To Kill a Mocking Bird*, Harper Lee (1960:121) argued that “real courage is when you know you’re licked before you begin but you begin anyway and you see it through no matter what. You rarely win, but sometimes you do”. Agency for many of the working classes, and the groups campaigning to better their circumstances, means acting and not achieving, striving but not succeeding. Understanding the reproductive nature of that struggle is at the heart of Bourdieu’s research. As he asserted in an interview, “it is nonsense to suggest I do not recognise the resistance of the dominated” (Bourdieu in Wacquant 1993: 35). Rather, it is struggle rather than reproduction that captures the guiding tenet of Bourdieu’s scholarship. His concept of field represents a social space characterised by competition and conflict. Social classes and other groups in society are constantly engaged in a struggle to realise their interests, to impose their view of the world as the dominant one over other social groups. But his work also illuminates how degrees of power and resource allocation almost always determine outcomes.

I am going to try and make sense of how the more things change the more they stay the same by asking three questions, and using Bourdieusian insights to answer them. Much of Bourdieu’s scholarship is a process of asking questions, and then working through how we might answer them. Bourdieu is constantly raising questions in his writing and lectures, - on one page I counted 11 question marks!

My intention is not really to transmit a complete and closed body of knowledge but rather a manner of thinking, a manner of asking questions.
(Bourdieu 2018:30)

He often follows up one question by commenting that there is a new question he really needs to answer that is a totally different one to the original. And thinking through the questions I have posed, often elicited different new questions that came up in the process of trying to reach an answer to the first question.

So, in the spirit of Bourdieu, I have chosen three pressing questions that relate to social stasis, the failure of resistance, and the inadequacies of agency. My first question is:

In an age of rapid and constant change, why are power dynamics so difficult to shift?

Just why do the masses allow the elite few to dictate and dominate? Bourdieu provides us with some very useful conceptual tools to make sense of that domination from doxa and symbolic violence to misrecognition. But all those concepts point us in the direction of a necessary pessimism about the possibilities of progressive, as opposed to regressive or relapsing, change. Reproduction always seems to triumph over resistance. As Bourdieu argued:

The dominated, in any social universe, can always exert a certain force, inasmuch as belonging to a field means by definition that one is capable of producing effects in it (if only to elicit reactions of exclusion on the part of those who occupy its dominant positions) [...] there is no denying that there exist dispositions to resist... [yet] the dominated seldom escape the antimony of domination" (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 80)

So, for example, many European and US ethnographies of working-class educational experiences portray schooling as a site of struggle but never sites of sufficient struggle to lead to systemic changes and structural transformation. The evidence shows us that it is one thing to challenge educational domination, it is an entirely different thing to undo it.

As Bourdieu makes very clear throughout his writings, to be dominant in society is to also have the power to make truths exist merely by telling them. Over the period of Donald Trump's first term, *The Washington Post* documented over 30,000 false or misleading statements issued by his government. Just one example, he has claimed to bring peace to the world, yet since coming to power in 2025 he has authorised US military action in 8 countries to date (Harris 2026). And he is not attempting to enthrall us with his amazing rhetoric. A recent academic study found that he had the vocabulary level of a 9 year old. Similarly in the run up to the Brexit referendum, Boris Johnson repeatedly told the UK electorate that if they voted for Brexit the National Health System would get an extra 350 million a week, a blatant lie, and he was largely believed, and even went on to be elected as prime minister.

What defines the dominant in society is their ability to impose their own perceptions of themselves, others, and wider society, on the dominated. What Bourdieu makes very clear is that we always need to evaluate, and take into account, the power of the person making claims, the degree to which they are (mis)recognized as an "authority", or as someone who "knows what they are talking about", and given a platform in the media or politics. Inevitably, dominant categories of thought often win out, and Bourdieu called this power to impose one's own worldview as common sense symbolic power. (Bourdieu 1991). Exercising such common sense symbolic power is something that Donald Trump is extremely successful at, and epitomises the essence of symbolic violence, while the belief of a majority of the electorate that he was speaking "the truth" encapsulates what Bourdieu meant by misrecognition. (Bourdieu 1991) The concept of misrecognition is often applied to working class misrecognition of their oppression but far less frequently to upper and middle class misrecognition of their privileged exploitation of others. It is almost as if it is impolite to point out that the rich and powerful exploit the rest of us, but also that the middle classes more widely shore up their relative privilege at the expense of those with less economic and cultural capital. But, of course, it makes any attempts to shift the balance of power in societies extremely difficult as it is those who have a monopoly of the dominant capitals who control the doxa and determine what is self evident.

I want to talk about another form of symbolic violence that maintains the status quo

– the imposition of neoliberalism across the globe. Bourdieu describes neoliberalism as a new moral order, based on the reversal of values of common interests (Bourdieu 1998c). Underpinning neoliberalism is a political operation rooted in a programme of destroying all collectives that obstruct the logic of the market, and are capable of resisting the market.

In *Acts of Resistance* Bourdieu writes that it is “through passive complicity that a view of the world that is called neo-liberal, but is in fact conservative, has progressively taken root, based on an atavistic faith in historical inevitability” (Bourdieu 1998a:40). For Bourdieu, this new planetary vulgate is the consequence of an essentially symbolic type of imperialism. – “from which the terms ‘capitalism’, ‘class’, ‘exploitation’, ‘domination’ and ‘inequality’ are remarkably absent, all having been categorically revoked under the pretext that they are obsolete and no longer pertinent”.

Bourdieu develops a sustained historical analysis of the assault on the state. In *Acts of Resistance*, he writes:

It is impossible to understand the present state of affairs without taking into account the wholesale conversion to neoliberalism that began in the 1970s and was accomplished in the mid-1980s when Socialist leaders joined the camp. It was accompanied by a destruction of the idea of public service, in which new “leading intellectuals” collaborated [...] by making economic liberalism the necessary and sufficient condition of political freedom (Bourdieu 1998a:4).

He also writes that the only effective response is a critical force of contestation backed by similar mobilisation. But, as we look around Europe and North America today, there is growing austerity, increasing poverty, a depleted, under-resourced working class and weak, constrained trade unionism. This dominance of neoliberalism, and the weakness of any counter-movements, makes any form of contestation even less likely to be successful than it was when Bourdieu was writing. Yet, dominant ideologies like neoliberalism are in effect partial and partisan depictions of the truth, that because they are pronounced by the rich and powerful, have managed to succeed in being recognised as universal.

And, as Bourdieu makes clear, that legitimacy comes not from the content of the words being enunciated but from the position and status of the enunciator. It is all about who is seen to be telling the truth of the social world. And it is not the left-wing sociologist, despite the facts and figures she marshalls in defence of her arguments. Here again Bourdieu’s concepts, this time his notion of the field of power, are very useful. While the media, politics, art, literature, academia, law and business all have their own fields with specific forms of capital, and internal struggles between the dominated and the dominant, overarching these is the meta-field of power. Here the most powerful in the different constituent fields struggle to impose their own definitions of reality. As Bourdieu claimed, it is the possessors of power in the economic field who are winning out over possessors of power in the field of cultural production, and consequently are dominant within the field of power.

So that again leads to a further question rather than providing an answer - what part does economics play in this situation? My first degree was in Economics so I am very aware of the discipline's poor track record on social justice and equality. We have abandoned our world to what Bourdieu describes as "the blind forces of economics" and economics is making that world uncaring and unkind, acting as a device for the distribution of neoliberal violence in its actual and symbolic forms.

The work of rationalisation – giving reasons to justify things that are often unjustifiable – has found a very powerful instrument in the mathematical economics that dominates in our universities. Orthodox economics has come to view itself as a value-free quasi-scientific discipline underpinned by mathematics. The dominance of mathematics within the discipline has reinforced the tendency, in Bourdieu's words, "to take the things of logic for the logic of things" (Bourdieu 1998b:77), emptying economics of both empirical content and critical reflexivity.

This has resulted in what Bourdieu calls "the totally unjustifiable separation between the economic and the social" (Bourdieu 1998b:77). For Bourdieu, this leads to the failure of any policy that has any other end than to safeguard economic order and stability. Well before Warren Buffet declared that we had capitalism for the poor and socialism for the rich, Bourdieu was showing us how capitalism in its reinvention as neoliberalism was ruthlessly protecting the global elite at the expense of the masses in its over-riding goal of ensuring the economic order. (Bourdieu 2005).

Economics presents us with a very particular, partial truth that leads us to very different understandings of the social world to those revealed through a sociological lens. But those economic truths are the dominant ones in which, according to Bourdieu, economics forbids responsibility and mobilisation by cancelling out politics and imposing a whole set of unquestioned ends – maximum growth, competitiveness, and productivity to which I would add another – profit maximisation – although perhaps for Bourdieu, this goes without saying! In *Sketch for a Self-analysis*, Bourdieu writes that there are few intellectuals who call the intellectual world into question (Bourdieu 2008), but this is especially true of economists in relation to economics. The tortuous structure of the economic field is one where doxa dictates practice, which forms the object of study in order to produce knowledge, which in turn reinforces doxa. The field appears to be structured around a feedback loop which preserves field integrity by endlessly reproducing and revalidating doxa. The doxa's inclusion of unexamined claims to scientific objectivity then preserves the smooth flow of self-legitimising information by refusing to recognise anything produced outside the loop as valid knowledge (Scott 2023). Economics is in a state of Bourdieusian hysteresis.

Economists may refute both the labels neoliberal and elitist but both women, and the working classes, are still on the margins of the discipline. We may have moved beyond the view, espoused by the Head of my Economics department, that women have smaller brains and are inevitably intellectually inferior to men but Economics departments in the UK have one of the highest percentages of privately educated students of all the academic disciplines, and the lowest proportion of students from working class backgrounds. The suppression of heterodox thinking may explain

the lack of reflexivity within the discipline. There is a widespread inability to both learn the lessons of the past and take into consideration the possibilities and threats presented by the future. Economics as a discipline is a classic example of “same as it ever was”.

As Bourdieu writes, words, are replete with double meanings (Bourdieu 1991). Those with dominant power within the field of power are able to make words mean what they want them to mean. So we have seen the appropriation of the term social justice, and the demonization of socialism. In the UK we now have a right-wing social justice think tank, run by millionaire ex-conservative ministers, pedalling neoliberal versions of social justice that endorse charity rather than public provision as a means of tackling poverty, and view the poor as authors of their own impoverishment. Commenting on poverty in the UK, a leading charity summed up the situation in six words: “Nothing’s changed. Everything’s changed. It’s worse” (Rowntree Foundation 2026: 4). Yet, in a UK where socialism is increasingly becoming a prohibited and defiled term, right-wing understandings of social justice prevail, because of the power and position of those espousing such views.

But, we need to look at the role played by the so-called impartiality of mainstream academic research. Intellectuals and cultural producers have traditionally occupied a dominated position within the overall power elite, Bourdieu called us the “poor cousins” of the economic bourgeoisie (Bourdieu 1998a). Yet, those at the top of academic hierarchies, in Bourdieusian terms, those at the centre of the cultural field, have the power to take initiatives in the struggle for the dominant interpretation of reality.

But far too often a process of mutual aid exists within the field of power with those with high reserves of cultural capital, still primarily the dominated, and those with high reserves of economic capital, still primarily the dominant, frequently coming together to protect the field from any intrusions and disruptions. As Bourdieu began noting in the 1980s, the opposition between economically dominant and culturally dominated positions on the one hand, and culturally dominant and economically dominated positions on the other began to fade because, as he argued, the most successful intellectuals are increasingly richer in economic capital [...] and especially because, at the dominant pole of the dominant class, ever more cultural capital is being accumulated” (Bourdieu 1984).

It is this ability to act in mutual self-interest, to fashion dispositions of self- and mutual protection that have been so successful in holding the status quo on place. And it is these same dispositions of mutual support and protection that have sadly been increasingly eroded among the working classes and the left. Rather, what we find is that even when so-called left of centre parties get into power, pragmatism becomes the end rather than the means, and any commitment to improving the condition of the working classes evaporates.

This brings me to my second question:

Why does not social mobility work, even for the socially mobile?

It now takes, on average, five generations for a person of low income to move to a medium income in England, compared to only three generations in Sweden (Marmot 2025). So change comes quicker in Sweden than it does in England but even so it comes at a glacial pace. Social mobility, at its current rate in Sweden or England, is insufficient to transform either society. First, there is the issue of whether those lucky few pull up the drawbridge behind them or extend a helping hand downwards. Too often in the English context it is about escape and a dread of return that makes transformative processes highly improbable (Reay 2025). But second, the very low levels of social mobility mean there is never a critical mass entering the middle and upper classes with the capacity to enable progressive change within those classes. Rather, than having an impact there are powerful processes of absorption within, and conformity to, the new field. And the very few socially mobile who achieve a trajectory from the bottom to the top of society rarely retain a sense of solidarity with those they have left behind. We only have to look at what J D Vance (2016:126) writes in his autobiography *Hillbilly Eulogy* about the working class community he grew up in:

As a teacher at my old high school told me recently, “They want us to be shepherds to these kids. But no one wants to talk about the fact that many of them are raised by wolves.

Nearly every person you will read about in this book is deeply flawed. Some have tried to murder other people, and a few were successful. Some have abused their children, physically or emotionally. Many abused (and still abuse) drugs.

When it succeeds social mobility is a form of asset stripping the working classes, when it fails it becomes an assault on working class culture as static and unambitious. Low social mobility is redefined as a lack of working class aspiration and ability. In the 21st century the uncredentialed have become the new pariahs, both judged and judging themselves. Many of the working classes, positioned at the bottom of the educational hierarchy, see the school system as the source of an immense, collective disappointment, a promised land which, like the horizon, recedes as one moves towards it. Subject to symbolic violence, they misrecognise themselves as the authors of their failure rather than the system itself.

Yet, as well as negatively stereotyping and blaming the always working classes, social mobility often fails to realise its promise for the educationally successful working classes. Bourdieu asserts that:

in each of us, in varying proportions, there is part of yesterday’s man; it is yesterday’s man who inevitably predominates in us, since the present amounts to little compared with the long past in the course of which we were formed’.
(Bourdieu 2000:78-79)

One of Bourdieu's earliest articles is called *The dead seize the living*. We never escape our genealogy, it shapes who we are in the present, and that is still true in our highly individualised 2020s as it was when I was growing up in the 1950s and 60s. Much of the literature on social mobility emphasises the difficulties working-class young people have in reconciling a working-class background with the middle-class environments of the university and the professional labour market. We see a very different version of "the rags to riches" trajectory, celebrated in neoliberal ideology, in Bourdieu's own writing. In *Sketch for a Self-Analysis* (2008) he describes social mobility as "a very cruel unhappiness". And we can see that cruelty and unhappiness throughout the book. So, here are just a few examples:

- "extreme sadness and anxiety in which I lived" (page 47)
- "Invest myself body and soul in the frenzied work that would allow me to measure up" (page 47)
- "the inner desolation of solitary grief" (page 71)
- "frenetic work was also a way of filling an immense void and pulling myself out of despair" (page 71)
- "I lived my life in a kind of stubborn fury"(page 96)
- "I conceived success as a transgression and a treachery. There were many sleepless nights" (page 109)
- "I had to practice a kind of semi-controlled schizophrenia" (page 110)

These are not the words of a happy, well-balanced man, but I would argue those of us who have been socially mobile can recognise elements of ourselves in his autobiographical writing. And Bourdieu synthesises all those emotions, inclinations and practices when he develops the concept of "the cleft habitus" (Bourdieu 1999a:511). It is reassuring for those of us who feel torn in different directions to know that a cleft habitus is a regular outcome of a social mobility trajectory – that your internal conflicts and tensions are not the result of personal deficits and failings, but a common occurrence among the socially mobile.

Social mobility is not just about the individual and their personal journey, it is often a collective enterprise, arising out of the hopes and desires of the wider family and community. As a consequence, despite the collective impulses driving social mobility, it constitutes the embodiment of social failure because the socially mobile's solitary rise through the classes is inevitably about individual success at the expense of solidarity, and the raising of the entire class. It is about change at the individual level at the cost of wider collective change. Yet, for many of us who move upwards out of the working class, the loss of that solidarity results in a constant ache, a permanent sense of bereavement. If I am unrecognisable to the people and community I have come from, how then can I recognise myself? Shame, grief, and guilt are constant dangers. The pull of the originary field does not disappear rather it continues to haunt the socially mobile.

But I want to argue Bourdieu's concept of field points us in a further direction. Working with his tool-kit reveals the more hidden subtle processes of exclusion and exclusivity that permeate social life in elite fields. This is not just a case of elites looking

the other way, of ignoring, although they do that too, but rather actively looking in stereotyping, judgemental ways. As Bourdieu (1986) argues, in *Forms of Capital* the issue immediately confronting those who use the concept of field is the question of boundaries. I would add a further key issue of who controls and has power over those boundaries. It is not simply that we, the socially mobile, are unable to shed our working-classness; it is also that the middle and upper classes are unable to stay focused on the shiny new academically successful persona we present them with. Rather, their habitus directs them to constantly look for our lacks of distinction, the snags and tears in our new veneer. Bourdieu allows us to have a very different story of social mobility to the dominant ideology of the 21st century. One that is not simply fixated on the socially mobile individual, her fractures, tensions, conflicts, adaptations, and accommodations, but more holistically on relations in the new fields she encounters, shining a light on working class reception in elite fields, and how that reception acts to reinforce reproductive aspects of the elite field. It also reinforces reproductive dimensions of the habitus just as much as it enables transformation.

The academy is a field defined by male as well as upper class power – a space where racism of intelligence is compounded by the misogyny of intelligence. As Bourdieu makes clear, those taken-for-granted privileges of class, race and gender persist over the life course. What he does not always make clear enough is how intertwined and mutually reinforcing they are. What Bourdieu teaches us is that social class is a relational concept in which working-class experiences do not make sense unless they are contextualised within the wider class hierarchy. Just who is drawing the boundaries, and has the power to ensure they are enforced? We cannot understand working-class experiences of education, and particularly higher education, without looking at how both the upper and middle classes are positioned within education, their educational practices, and how these in turn impact working-class students.

The work of working class reproduction is largely produced by the middle and upper classes as a by-product of their own class reproduction. Working class self-exclusion follows exclusion imposed by more powerful others. Through the lens of Bourdieusian theory we can see that the culprits of social mobility stagnation are not working class individuals failing to make themselves middle class but the already privileged upper and middle classes exercising their rights, and using their capitals.

Focusing on the academic field and its latent, and often not so latent, class, race and gender prejudices, enables us to push back on the preoccupation with imposter syndrome, which too often becomes yet another way of blaming the victim, locating the problem in the working class newcomer. Any sense of not belonging is a symptom, not a cause, of exclusion from the field. It is middle and upper class practices of social closure, and attitudes of disrespect and disdain that have efficacy, and the power to exclude.

So this brings me to my third and last question:

Does the educational system have any part to play in transforming society for the better (and fairer)?

Immediately two other questions spring to mind. Where do we look in society for commitments to progressive change? And is the educational system one of those places? Bourdieu certainly saw the universities as central to the struggle for a better, fairer world, arguing that researchers have to provide political action with new ends, namely the demolition of dominant beliefs, and new means, such as “symbolic weapons” capable of undermining common beliefs by putting research findings into what he calls “an accessible form” (Bourdieu 1998a:vii). Although I am not sure we can call Bourdieu’s own writing “research in an accessible form”, he has provided us with an impressive body of sociological theory that has an analysis of power and inequality at its heart. A Bourdieusian sociology of knowledge is a sociology of symbolic power. Whether Bourdieu was studying Algerian peasants, students, writers, artists, university professors or the socially excluded, a central unifying preoccupation emerges: the question of how stratified social systems of hierarchy and domination persist and reproduce intergenerationally without powerful resistance and without the conscious recognition of their members .

But those of us who have been activists all our lives have to recognise that far too often our resistance is washed away by the repetitions of history. I campaigned vehemently for abortion rights in the 1960s, now we are having to do it all again. I spent a lot of my time at university fighting again apartheid and imperialistic wars, yet racism and war-mongering are endemic in the 2020s. In the 1970s I was a housing activist working for decent housing for the working classes and challenging the rentier class but today the rentiers are back in force, and include many of my fellow academics – all that resistance, mainly going nowhere.

For Bourdieu, ‘what is problematic is the fact that the established order is not problematic’ (Bourdieu 1977). He viewed research as not just about the production of knowledge but part of the struggle to generate social change through providing different ways of seeing the social world:

scientific explanation should teach the researcher where his liberties are really situated and resolutely to refuse the infinitesimal acts of cowardice and laxness which leave the power of social necessity intact, to fight in himself and in others the opportunist indifference or conformist weariness which allows the social milieu to impose the slippery slope of resigned compliance and submissive complicity. (Bourdieu 1988:4-5)

Since Bourdieu was writing in the 1970s and 80s universities have become very different places. Higher education has become a field in which the vast majority of academics are ever more dominated within the field of power, and ever more likely to have to collude with neoliberal forces of retrenchment .

It is even more difficult to see the role of schools in promoting progressive change. In the UK, schools are returning to their original incarnation as charitable institutions but in a very different guise to their 19th century antecedents (Reay 2025). In disadvantaged areas, schools have become an integral part of what Bourdieu calls “state

charity” (Bourdieu 1998a). We now have poor schools and rich schools within the state sector, and the poor schools have food banks, and sometimes clothes and toy banks, in their school halls (Baker 2023), holes in their roofs, and demoralised and over-worked teachers. We have the educational version of the economic vulgate! – a powerful educational orthodoxy based on the premises “the winner takes all” (Bourdieu 1998a). The neoliberal utopia of unlimited exploitation has invaded the classroom as well as the labour market. And I know similar processes are starting to happen in Sweden. Over the last year I have been working with a group of Swedish parents trying to publicise the negative impact on students of no-excuses schooling in schools with large numbers of ethnic minority students (Kazmierska 2026).

As a consequence, the Darwinian world Bourdieu described in relation to the economy now exists in our schools and universities which operate on the basis of “the survival of the brightest”. Education has become part of the problem rather than an answer or challenge to current inequalities. Over the last five years I have been carrying out interviews with teachers and young people in English academies. They speak of coercion, harsh discipline, rigid hierarchies, and constant surveillance (Reay 2025).

The neoliberal approaches to education, that have swept into our schools and universities, are a return to the past rather than a progressive move towards a fairer future. And they are making both students and their teachers unhappy. Bourdieu does not write a great deal about well-being and happiness, but he does talk about the need to replace the naturalised economy of neo-liberalism with an economy of happiness, one that recognises the costs in suffering and the profits in fulfilment that are ignored in simplistic economic priorities of profitability and productivity (Bourdieu 1998b). He argues that one form resistance can take is for workers to insist that social costs be included in economic decisions and calculations. I suggest that is what our schools and universities desperately need – a re-focusing that shifts educational priorities from economic goals and academic outcomes to those of well-being, fulfilment, flourishing and happiness.

Conclusion

Everything needs to change for everything to remain the same
Tancredi in Lampedusa’s *The Leopard*

So to conclude Bourdieu’s conceptual arsenal – including field theory, capital theory, habitus, symbolic violence, misrecognition, doxa, and the field of power – provide a set of constructs and ideas that shed light on elite structures, power and reproduction, helping to illuminate what is really going on beneath appearances of constant change and flux. His work also provides glimpses of ways forward but those glimpses provide visions that are sometimes hazy and difficult to see clearly. He leaves us with a blurred landscape we need to do the work of making distinct.

First, we need to understand and map the forces of reproduction and oppression in

order to begin the work of challenging and opposing them. Reproduction may sound like an outdated macro concept, one that conveys an image of society characterised by continuity moving forward in a linear predictable direction, but we need to recognise its innovative transgressive qualities, the way it loops and somersaults in creative reinventions in order to sustain the status quo.

Bourdieu makes very clear that it is essential to generate awareness of the mechanisms that make life painful, even unliveable for many in society. He stresses that we need to get at the economic and social determinants of the innumerable attacks on the freedom of individuals and their desires for happiness and self-fulfilment. And he offers hope for us sociologists:

Skeptical as one may be about the social efficacy of the sociological message, one has to acknowledge the effect it can have in allowing those who suffer to find out that their suffering can be imputed to social causes and thus to feel exonerated; and in making generally known the social origin, collectively hidden, of unhappiness in all its forms, including the most intimate, the most secret. (Bourdieu 1999b:629)

Those of us committed to a fairer society need to come together in creating the collective production of what Bourdieu calls “realistic utopias”. In the face of a hugely successful right-wing revolution from above, this will inevitably prove to be an extremely difficult enterprise. But, as Bourdieu concludes in *Weight of the World*:

what society has done, it can, armed with this knowledge, undo.
(Bourdieu 1999b:629)

And what we need, if we are to undo the enormous harm generated by neoliberalism, is more, not less, cleft habitus. We need to think through, and bring about, social and economic circumstances that work against the generation of coherent and unified habitus. At times of austerity and growing inequalities, the more splintered and discordant habitus is the better: As Bourdieu (1977:78) wrote:

That habitus can “misfire” and have “critical moments of perplexity and discrepancy” when it is incapable of generating practices conforming to the milieu, constitutes a major spring of personal resistance, social innovation and structural transformation.

I began this article on a personal note and I would like to end on one. As an academic who view themselves as a lifelong political activist, fighting for the rights of the working classes in English society, my natural disposition is to reject deterministic analyses. The working classes and their supporters are constantly pursuing social justice goals, engaged in action to transform society. We share an optimism of the will, if not of the intellect. But despite our campaigning and activism, our activism

has not transformed England into a more equal society, rather it has become steadily more unequal. “The long labour of forging a united group” (Bourdieu 1991:229) capable of challenging unjust class relations and redressing class inequalities, is very much an unfinished project. And it is important to understand why, despite constantly changing social and economic circumstances, and an educational system that is very different to the educational system even twenty years ago, that change has not been forthcoming.

Rather, Bourdieu’s research reveals how individuals are constantly making and remaking the structures that limit (and in the case of the privileged enhance) their power and agency in everyday processes in which “social structures and cognitive structures are recursively and structurally linked” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992:14). It also allows us to glimpse, albeit faintly, the challenges to those structures, and the extent to which they generate contradictions and crises. We can only continue to hope for many more misfirings of the habitus.

Author biography

Diane Reay grew up in a working class coal mining community. She is now Emeritus Professor of Education at the University of Cambridge and President of the UK Socialist Education Association. The second edition of her book *Miseducation: Inequality, Education and the Working Classes* was published by Policy Press in 2025.

References

- Baker, W. (2023) “Schools and food charity in England”, *British Educational Research Journal*, 49(6): 1387–402.
- Bourdieu, P. (1977) *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bourdieu, P. (1984) *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Bourdieu, P. (1986) “The Forms of Capital” p 241-258 in J. G. Richardson (ed.) *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education* New York: Greenwood Press.
- Bourdieu P. (1988) *Homo Academicus* Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Bourdieu, P. (1990) *In Other Words: Essays towards a Reflexive Sociology* Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Bourdieu, P. (1991) *Language and Symbolic Power* Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Bourdieu, P (1993) in L. Wacquant “From Ruling Class to Field of Power: An interview with Pierre Bourdieu on La Noblesse d’État” *Theory, Culture & Society* 10 (3), 19-44.
- Bourdieu, P. (1998a) *Acts of Resistance: Against the Tyranny of the State*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Bourdieu, P. (1998b) *Practical Reason: On the Theory of Action*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Bourdieu, P. (1998c) “The Essence of Neoliberalism”. *Le Monde Diplomatique*. March 1998, p3.

- Bourdieu, P. (1999a) "The Contradictions of Inheritance" 507–511 in P. Bourdieu et al. (eds.) *Weight of the World: Social suffering in contemporary society* Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Bourdieu, P. (1999b) "Postscript" in P. Bourdieu et al. (eds.) *Weight of the World: Social suffering in contemporary society* Cambridge: Polity Press. Pp 627-629.
- Bourdieu, P. (2005) *The Social Structures of the Economy*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Bourdieu, P. (2008) *Sketch for a Self-Analysis*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Bourdieu, P. (2018) *Classification Struggles: General Sociology, Volume I. Lectures at the College de France, 1981–82*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Bourdieu, P., Passeron, J-C. (1977) *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture* London: Sage Publications Ltd.
- Bourdieu, P., Passeron, J-C (1979) *The Inheritors* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Bourdieu, P and Wacquant, L. (1992) *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Harris, G. (2026) *List of every country Trump has authorized military action as World War 3 fears grow*. <https://www.unilad.com/news/world-news/donald-trump-administration-us-military-action-countries-661402-20260320>
- Harper, L. (1960) *To Kill a Mocking Bird* Philadelphia: Lippincott,
- Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2026) *UK Poverty 2026*. <https://www.jrf.org.uk/uk-poverty-2026-the-essential-guide-to-understanding-poverty-in-the-uk>
- Kazmierska, N. (2026) "The professor on strict school methods: children feel bad about punishments: No connection between harsh discipline and high results – according to research". *Aftonbladet*. 5 April. <https://www.aftonbladet.se/nyheter/a/d4n2mz/professorn-om-no-excuses-barn-mar-daligt-av-bestraffningar>
- Lampedusa, G. (2005) *The Leopard*. London: Vintage.
- Marmot, M. (2025) *Oral Evidence to Works and Pensions Committee* 25th April 2025. <https://committees.parliament.uk/oralevidence/16117/html/>
- Marx, K. (1852) *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*. First issue of Die Revolution, New York.
- Reay, D. (2025) *Miseducation* (2nd ed). Bristol: Policy Press.
- Vance, J. D. (2016) *Hillbilly Elegy. A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis*. London: HarperCollins.