
Why people should read Bourdieu

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The work of Pierre Bourdieu is not easy. In fact that is an understatement. If you read Bourdieu's books, articles or theories it seems nearly impossible to read and make sense of them, whether you are an undergraduate or even a postgraduate student, a teacher or even a lecturer at a university. Should we give up on using Bourdieu's work outside of the university? I say no - there should be no shame or embarrassment in struggling to try and understand or teach what Bourdieu is saying about the world, and especially your world, which may seem a million miles away from elite universities and the academy. I am writing this to encourage us all to bear with Bourdieu. His work and the way I have used the theoretical tools he provides in his writings and ideas have been life changing for me. I came across Bourdieu's book *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* for the first time as an undergraduate student, and was confronted by the first line:

Sociology is rarely more akin to psychoanalysis than when it confronts an object like taste, one of the most vital stakes in the struggles fought in the field of the dominant class and the field of cultural production. (1989 p.11)

When I went to university I did not come through the usual route of school and A-levels. I had taken an Access course at a further education college and was in my thirties, working-class and a mother living on a council estate in Nottingham. When I read that opening line I was terrified and intrigued. As a working-class woman who had always lived on council estates I knew that working-class people like me were 'looked down on' in many different ways - for our lack of money, but also for our 'taste': the things we liked, such as music, television programmes, and the clothes we wore. As a working-class woman I knew what it was like to be 'looked down on' but found it hard to think about 'why'. It was Pierre Bourdieu's critique of how 'culture' in our society was given 'values', and how everything about you was constantly under scrutiny - some things were 'valued' while other things were 'de-valued'. It seemed to me that this French guy called Pierre Bourdieu was saying something that I had always known but had found it hard to articulate. I remember asking myself: am I really judged as 'less than' through the clothes I

wear, the television programmes I like to watch and the way I speak? Bourdieu said, 'Yes, you are, and here is why' - and I was hooked. What I took from that early reading of Bourdieu was that social class was connected to culture, the economy and our social networks, and all had values attached to them. Bourdieu shows us how it is 'high' culture and the 'tastes' of the middle and upper class which are highly valued, and that culture and taste are not arbitrary; they have meaning and are always judged.

Bourdieu helped me to understand, and to come to terms with, how class is easy to read on the body, the way you walked, talked and the clothes you wore, but also through practice. What a person does, where they go and what they enjoy in life, who they mix with, and who their family and friends are - all is judged, according to Bourdieu. I was a working-class woman trying to navigate through an elite space, a Russell Group university - in Nottingham, only three miles away from my home, and yet the only people at the university with the same accent as me were the cleaners and the canteen staff. Being judged on my accent, and the clothes I wore, my family and my community, the place where I lived, I knew I was always under scrutiny. I delved into Bourdieu's book *Distinction* further and realised I was entering a very strange world, with very difficult language that I was struggling to understand. At first I was annoyed that the language Bourdieu used was difficult, and yet I knew people like me needed to read his work to understand that class discrimination happens, and happens everyday and all the time, as we are judged and valued constantly. It made me angry, and actually still does, when I read academic work like this - which is why when asked to write this article I agreed. Pierre Bourdieu's ideas on class inequality are important for working-class people to read. They allow us to understand the thousands of paper-cuts that class discrimination feels like daily.

Pierre Bourdieu wanted his work to be used. He understood his theoretical philosophy as 'tools' - tools that needed to be used in the social examination of the world. And that is how I have used his work. I have applied them and I have also read the work of many others who also apply his work in similar ways to mine. Bev Skeggs, Diane Reay, Mike Savage, Steph Lawler and Valerie Walkerdine have all used Bourdieu's

theoretical tools to make sure that social research uncovers power relationships and exposes discrimination, as I have. Bourdieu maintains that:

The task of sociology is to uncover the most profoundly buried structures of the various social worlds and the relations of power and the relations of meanings between groups and classes.

This was my first understanding of Bourdieu, and this is how I put him to work in my own research in a council estate in Nottingham. I took on 'the task' to find out how 'power relations' in society work, especially the deeply rooted class system. How far away from each other do those things seem: the upper echelons of French academia, philosophy and society from a council estate in a very dreary and brutal inner city place in the East Midlands of the United Kingdom. However, I took on that challenge that Bourdieu calls the 'theory of practice' - meaning his ideas should be used to explain, but also to expose, how power is used to advantage some groups but to also disadvantage others.

Bourdieu's theory of practice also allows us to look at our own social positions. In fact he demands that all social researchers should - we need to examine ourselves in the same way that we examine others. This is called 'reflexivity'. Being reflexive - thinking about our own class positions - allows us to understand how we understand the social world, acknowledging that our life experiences, our lens, must always be contextualised.

I used this theory in my own work in St Anns in Nottingham, a council estate where working-class people who live there have over time been devalued because of their class position, and at the same time it was also the place where I lived. Council estates like St Anns have been 'narrated' as places where people of little 'value' live, and also the place itself has little value - we all know those places, in whatever part of the country we live, that are known as 'rough' and even 'dangerous'. Bourdieu would argue that these 'spaces' have been 'devalued' because of the seemingly 'valueless' people who live in them - and at the same time the devalued space has a stigmatising effect on the people who live there.

Bourdieu calls this space 'habitus'. Habitus is a social space that an individual inhabits that is in constant connection with the physical space they inhabit - the place where you live - but it connects with other people's habitus, therefore Bourdieu argues that people, places and experiences can all be read by each other in the ways we look, move, speak, the things we say and do, and the places we know and where we go, but also how we are connected to others. Not only are we all reading each other's 'habitus', we are also making value judgements about them. So how do we know who is valued, and what is valued?

Within my own research in Nottingham, the networks and engagements located in neighbourhood culture were often practiced through representation: how people who lived on the estates represented themselves within them. When I asked people on the estate 'to tell me about themselves', they often replied with 'I'm typical St Anns'. I interviewed mostly women, who explained what 'typical St Anns' meant. They talked about what they wore, how they spoke, the importance of being part of the community, helping each other out. The women felt a real sense of injustice that they were constantly stereotyped by those on the outside. However, it seemed that conformity to outside values was not an option for them, because it was these cultural markers that made them 'belong' in their community. This was so even though they saw themselves as - and noted that they were being - 'looked down on', citing programmes like *Little Britain*, where they had seen characters that caricatured them and which invited an audience to laugh at working-class women and girls.

In 2013 I went to work at the London School of Economics on the Great British Class Survey with Professor Mike Savage. We were looking at 'class in Britain' through the lens of Bourdieu and his concepts of 'capital'. This resulted in the Penguin book *Class in the 21st Century*. This was important research. Focusing on Bourdieu's understanding of class, we could understand concepts of 'class snobbery' but also how the middle class used culture, education and social networks not only to keep themselves in their privileged positions but simultaneously to reproduce class inequalities and keep the class system stable.

Bourdieu identifies four different types of capital - economic, cultural, social and symbolic - and it is the accumulation of these capitals, according to him, which determines inclusion in or exclusion from society. Economic capital includes income, wealth, financial inheritance and monetary assets. Cultural capital can exist in three forms: in an embodied state that is in the form of long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body, in the form of cultural goods, and in the institutionalised state, resulting in such things as educational qualifications. Social capital includes resources based on connections and group membership. Symbolic capital depends upon people believing that class hierarchies are innate.

Pierre Bourdieu is not easy to read, but, especially for working-class people who suspect the system is rigged against them, his tools for understanding class inequality are world-changing. He shows us that what we have suspected we are right to.