**Pierre Bourdieu: Stratification- Forms of Capital**

*Note prepared by Bisaka Blone for Sem IV CC10*

**Biography:** Pierre Bourdieu (1930–2002) was born to a working-class family in a small village in southern France called Denguin. Bourdieu’s father was a small farmer turned postal worker with little formal education, but he encouraged a young Bourdieu to pursue the best educational opportunities his country had to offer. Bourdieu took his father’s advice, eventually gaining admittance to one of France’s most prestigious universities, the École Normale Supérieure in Paris, where he studied philosophy under the famous Marxist thinker, Louis Althusser.

After receiving his doctorate, Bourdieu took a teaching position in Algiers, Algeria in 1958. Algeria was at that time a French colony, but a war was underway between France and an Algerian independence movement. During this time, Bourdieu undertook ethnographic fieldwork among the Kabyle, Algeria’s largest indigenous group. Based on his fieldwork, Bourdieu published his first book, The Algerians, which was an immediate success. Later, Bourdieu would also use this fieldwork to write Outline of a Theory of Practice, one of his first and most influential theoretical statements.

Bourdieu’s rising reputation as a leading social theorist landed him a position as Director of Studies at the École Pratique des Hautes Études and later, in 1981, the Chair of Sociology at the Collège de France.

Bourdieu was a prolific academic writer. He published more than 25 books and over 300 articles and essays over his career. He was also a leading public intellectual in France, speaking out and organizing protests against what he saw as the unfair and exploitative aspects of neoliberal economic policy and globalization. By the time of his death in 2002, Bourdieu was known as one of France’s greatest scholars and one of the most influential social theorists in the world.

**Bourdieu’s stratification: Introduction**

While he didn’t consider himself a Marxist sociologist, the theories of Karl Marx heavily influenced Bourdieu’s thinking where he borrowed some ideas about labour and capital from Marx, especially in his theory of cultural capital. Like Marx, Bourdieu argued that capital formed the foundation of social life and dictated one’s position within the social order. Bourdieu analyzes class or the position we hold within our society, through his theory of capital. Capital acts as a basis for class domination. Hence for Bourdieu and Marx both, capital is a source, a form of wealth which produces power and the more capital one has, the more powerful a position one occupies in social life.

However, Bourdieu differs from Marx in the sense that Bourdieu extended Marx’s idea of capital **beyond the economic** and into the more symbolic **realm of culture**.

Bourdieu uses capital not only in an economic sense but also he gives it some different meanings. For him, there are different forms of capital other than just economic capital such as cultural, symbolic and social. This definition of capital reflects his **multidimensional** explanation of social phenomena. Economic capital is "immediately and directly convertible into money" (Bourdieu, 1986: 245), but cultural capital (educational credentials) and social capital (social connections) are not.

Bourdieu developed theories of social stratification based on aesthetic taste in his 1979 work [*Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Distinction_(1979_book)) (in French, [*La Distinction*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/La_Distinction)), published by Harvard University Press. Bourdieu’s main argument is that class distinctions are determined by not only economic capital but because of a combination of the varying degrees of [social](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_capital), [economic](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Economic_capital), and [cultural capital](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cultural_capital) because he says capital can present itself in these three fundamental forms. Later he also added symbolic capital.

**Economic capital**

It is immediately and directly convertible to money and may be institutionalised in the form of property rights, possessions etc.

**Social capital**

It refers to social networks we are a part of and the status these networks provide us. For instance, your father may be the head of a multinational corporation; therefore, he may choose to groom you to take over his position in the company someday. Social capital is best summed up by the old adage, "It's not what you know, it's who you know." These connections are convertible in certain conditions into economic capital and may be institutionalised in the form of a title of nobility.

Is the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to a membership of a group which provides each of its members with a backing of collectively owned capital. They may also be socially instituted and guaranteed by the application of a common name (the name of a family, a class, a tribe, of school, or a party)

An individual's social capital is determined by the size or their relationship network, the sum of its accumulated resources (both cultural and economic), and how successfully (quickly) the individual can set them in motion. According to Bourdieu, social networks must be continuously maintained and fostered over time in order for them to be called upon quickly in the future. The volume of social capital possessed by a given agent thus depends on the size of the network of connections he can effectively mobilize and on the volume of capital (economic, cultural or symbolic) possessed in his own right by each of those to whom he is connected.

For Bourdieu social capital is irreducibly attached to class and other forms of stratification which in turn are associated with various forms of benefit or advancement

**Cultural capital**

The concept of cultural capital was first introduced by French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1984, 1986), to be added to two other types of capital - economic and social (later he also added a fourth, symbolic capital) and is among Bourdieu's most distinctive contributions to critical theory.

Bourdieu’s concept of cultural capital refers to the collection of symbolic elements such as skills, tastes, posture, clothing, mannerisms, material belongings, credentials, etc. that one acquires through being part of a particular social class. Sharing similar forms of cultural capital with others—the same taste in movies, same material belongings—creates a sense of collective identity and group position (“people like us”). Each fraction of the class is based on differing social positions where each fraction “has its own artists and philosophers, newspapers and critics, just as it has its hairdresser, interior decorator, or tailor.”

Certain forms of cultural capital are valued over others and can help or hinder one’s social mobility just as much as income or wealth. In his view, class cannot be merely reduced to economic relations or position in the division of labour. Bourdieu points out that cultural capital is a major source of social inequality. It is a crucial dimension (“space”) of the mechanisms of reproduction and maintenance of social inequality. Cultural capital, in his view, is a social space in which conflicts of power are enacted, and social stratification is produced and transmitted intergenerationally.

According to Bourdieu, cultural capital comes in three forms—embodied, objectified, and institutionalized.

**The embodied cultural capital**: It is directly linked to and incorporated within the individual and represents what they know and can do. Embodied cultural capital consists of both the consciously acquired and the passively “inherited” features that characterize ways of being and feeling, such as language, tastes, patterns of communication and behaviour and so forth. It is acquired over time, through socialization. Embodied capital can be increased by investing time into self-improvement in the form of learning. As embodied capital becomes integrated into the individual, it becomes a type of ‘habitus’ and therefore cannot be transmitted instantaneously. One’s accent or dialect is an example of embodied cultural capital.

**Objectified cultural capital:** It consists of physical objects that are owned, material objects such as books, paintings, instruments, machines, a luxury car, a record collection or even our groceries.

**Institutionalized cultural capital**: This is also legitimated cultural capital, often in the form of educational credentials and qualifications such as degrees or titles which create a "certificate of cultural competence which confers on its holder a conventional, constant, legally guaranteed value with respect to power." These forms of cultural capital could be converted to other forms so that possessing embodied cultural capital enabled an individual to acquire institutionalized cultural capital.

Bourdieu claims that how one chooses to present one's social space to the world depicts one's status and distances oneself from lower groups. He believes class distinction and preferences are “most marked in the ordinary choices of everyday existence, such as furniture, clothing, or cooking, which are particularly revealing of deep-rooted and long-standing dispositions.

The developments of these dispositions are largely determined by social origin rather than accumulated capital and experience over time. The acquisition of cultural capital depends heavily on learning, performed within the family from the earliest days of life.  Bourdieu argues that people inherit their cultural attitudes, the accepted “definitions that their elders offer them and hence families are the primary agents of cultural transmission.

So If families are the primary agents of cultural transmission, schools play an important role in legitimising and strengthening it. According to Bourdieu, in fact, the school system tends to support and acknowledge the dominant culture. Education also enables the reproduction of class values; thus, maintaining class within society and reinforcing the mechanisms of reproduction of social inequality.

Pierre Bourdieu developed the concept of cultural capital in the late 1960s when studying the French educational system and noticing that middle-class students tended to persist through school, while working-class students had higher dropout rates. Bourdieu argued that although education was supposed to serve as a vehicle for social mobility where students could work to their natural aptitudes, the educational system actually reproduced the existing social class structure and one important mechanism through which this reproduction occurred was cultural capital.

There are many authors, who without necessarily sharing Bourdieu’s conflict-based view, have found that parental education has an impact on their children’s educational performance and the kind of culture (language use, tastes, modes of cultural participation and so forth) which is acquired and transmitted through primary and secondary socialization has a crucial impact on occupational choices and outcomes (e.g. de Graaf et al. 2000, Sullivan 2001, Barone 2006, van de Werfhorst 2010).

Bourdieu argued that schools operated based on the culture of the dominant class, and expected all students to be knowledgeable of it. While this was true for the middle and upper classes, who were exposed to this culture from birth and throughout childhood in the family setting, the working class and poor students lacked this cultural capital and were at a disadvantage in school.

Bourdieu stated that it was possible for members of the lower classes to acquire cultural capital, but it would stand out as different from the cultural capital of the middle classes. For those who were born into privileged families, cultural capital would become second nature, or as Bourdieu described it, ‘embodied’, and so it would be used unconsciously by middle- and upper-class students as they navigated the educational process. On the other hand, individuals whose first acquisition of cultural capital was in the school setting would have more stilted and scholarly cultural capital, and be less able to use it with the ease with which the middle-class students did.

This also happened because the cultural capital was recognized and rewarded by teachers and the school system was the kind possessed by the middle and upper classes. The children from the working class might not be viewed as favourable by teachers, they might not understand materials or assignments that were based on the dominant culture, and they might opt out of education themselves when seeing the mismatch between their cultural resources and those demanded by the school. Thus, middle and upper-class students were more likely to persist in school, attain credentials, and become part of the middle or upper class themselves upon adulthood, reinforcing stratification in society Thus Bourdieu is adamant in arguing that the education system merely acts as support to social stratification.

However, Bourdieu argued, a complete reproduction of the stratification system did not occur. Bourdieu stated that this was a way to keep people believing that success was based on one's ability and effort. In other words, a few students from the lower classes were selected and promoted by teachers, enabling them to succeed, so that others believed that they too had the opportunity to move up the [social stratification](https://www.sciencedirect.com/topics/social-sciences/social-stratification) ladder.

Hence academic success or failure is not simply an effect of natural aptitudes- investment in education is not simply a financial one. And the best hidden and socially determinant educational investment is the domestic transmission of cultural capital. Bourdieu also states that cultural and social capital are fundamentally rooted in economic capital but they can never be completely reduced to an economic form.

**Symbolic capital** refers to the means by which a person creates his physical and social reality, or presents his prestige. For example, symbolic capital can be found in the implementation of strategy, such as wearing particular brand names, in order to create an appearance.