

Work on habitus or overturn the table?

Pierre Bourdieu on possibilities for progressive social change

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Pierre Bourdieu is rightly regarded as one of the most important sociologists of the 20th and 21st centuries. However, his work did not distinguish itself through a plausible theory of revolution or analyses of positive social change. On the contrary. Bourdieu became known for his theory and empirical research on social reproduction. He showed how privileges are socially inherited in our formally free, capitalist industrial societies. He also showed that educational institutions, from daycare centers to elementary schools to universities, play a dominant role in reproducing existing social conditions. Bourdieu also showed that educational institutions in particular are responsible for ensuring that disadvantaged and underprivileged people accept and acknowledge the social conditions that severely limit their opportunities. Finally, with his version of the concept of habitus, Bourdieu illustrated how people subconsciously cling to their learned everyday practices, even if these behaviors are no longer appropriate or even disadvantageous to them. From a perspective of revolution and even reform, this immediately leads to a very skeptical view, which must reckon with habitual forces of resistance on the part of the population even after a revolution or major reform.

However, Bourdieu's writings can also be used to conceive of progressive change and social development. Bourdieu developed sociological tools that can be used to reveal social reproduction mechanisms. Above all, his concepts of symbolic power, symbolic domination, and symbolic violence can provide clues as to how entrenched conditions can be broken down. At the same time, however, he provides insights into the academic competition machine, which even this conference cannot escape, into problems of representation (the office effect) or the figure of the intellectual, which must be taken into account when people gather to discuss a better and more just society. This tension between poor social reproduction and intellectual self-aggrandizement, and how it might be avoided, will be discussed together.