

## INTRODUCING BOURDIEU

Dominique Desjeux

Professor of Social and Cultural Anthropology at the Sorbonne  
(University of Paris V)

Scientific Director of Argonautes: 2 rue des Portes Blanches,  
75018 Paris, France

email: [desjeux.argonautes@francenet.fr](mailto:desjeux.argonautes@francenet.fr))

I think Bourdieu is one of the most difficult Sociologist to be taught because his sociology focuses on :

Social classes

Power as a symbolic domination

Structure

He doesn't stress on individual, motivation, intention, freedom or choice.

That is why it is difficult introducing Bourdieu, it is not only because he is often a very abstract sociologist but more because his thoughts are most often on the other side from common knowledge.

So I am more thinking about the difficulty in receptioning Bourdieu than about the difficulty in explaining his thought.

It depends also on the culture. In China and in Africa the culture is more focused on the group than in France or in America.

So sometimes it is easier to teach Sociology or Anthropology in these countries than in western countries.

So in order to launch the course I would like to ask you some questions.

There no right or wrong answers. It is only to understand your representation of life. If I want to communicate with you I must know what are the intellectual frameworks what shape your ideas or emotions.

If you think about your daily life or that of people you know, Would you say more that you are free to choose or more you are under strong constraints ?

Or would you say that being poor or rich depends mainly on your will ?

- Try to speak slowly because my English is not good enough to understand an unformal discussion
- Would somebody help me in understanding the debate in writing on the balck board the main ideas or exemple.

## What are the main concept of Pierre Bourdieu ?

The main statement is that **social structures** exists. They are independant of intention and willingness (will or will power) of individuals : **we are mainly produced by society**, by social codes, values, language, education and so on.

These structures shape our way of dealing with reality. They produce **social norms**. These norms are most **often unconcious**. They are incorporated in our body and in our mind. This structural norms are called **habitus**.

An habitus is more than an habit or a routine even if an habit could be one part of an habitus. An habitus seems something « natural ».

For instance it seems natural to say « thank you » in specific situations. But depending upon the country (Danemark for instance), or the social class or the age (children or young people), saying thank you doesn't look as a normal norm.

The incorporation of these norms are the result of an unconscious « social training » (education, pairs interactions, etc.), that is a national, familial and individual History.

History is the producer of Institutions such as family, school, State or religion.

So the society is a mix of objective structure which are independant of social actors which are named « **agent** » and also the product of this agents. That is why it is so difficult to understand : we are at once produced by Society and producer of this Society.

But for Bourdieu who observes society from a **macro-scale of observation**, even he doesn't accept the idea of scales of observation, agents are unconsciously dominated by these norms or habitus.

**It is a social domination.** What is at stake is the control of the legitimation of these social norms by the most powerfull group of what Pierre Bourdieu calls a « **Champs** », a **field**, what means a social space within the social actors are involved in order to impose their norms.

But the actors have neither the same **room of maneuver** neither the same **asset** (trump cards) : they have a different « back ground » what is call by Bourdieu a **capital** (economic, social and cultural capital). This capital is strongly link to the social classes.

He showed in one of his first survey in 1967 how the son of the bougeoisie in France had more chance to get their diploma than the son of workers (cf. polytechnic).

The second more important study was on Taste as a social product.