

This Week's Citation Classic®

Bourdieu P & Passeron J-C. *Reproduction in education, society and culture.*
London: Sage, 1977. 254 p. (Translated from: *La reproduction: éléments pour une théorie du système d'enseignement.* Paris, France: Éditions de Minuit, 1970. 279 p.)
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Reproduction is the English translation of a book published in French in 1970. Building on the 1964 monograph *Les Héritiers* (translated as *The Inheritors* in 1979), it puts forth a theoretical model and an empirical analysis of the complex mechanisms through which the school system contributes to the reproduction of the structure of class and social relations. [The SSC® indicates that this book, in its French and English versions, has been cited in over 215 and 290 publications, respectively.]

How Schools Help Reproduce the Social Order

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July 23, 1988

Among the causes of the success of this study, which I wish was no longer read in isolation from my other works, the most obvious is arguably, along with the timing of its publication, its title, which made it the emblem of a new paradigm. (I cite here several works that are closely linked to *Reproduction*,¹⁻⁴ the first two of which provide a perspective on classroom interaction that anticipates the analyses of the ethnomethodologists, such as A.V. Cicourel.⁵) The cost of this more or less acknowledged position of theoretical leadership, however, was an extraordinary simplification—if not outright distortion—of the scientific thesis it propounded. Its advocates and adversaries alike have often joined in reducing an involved analysis of the extremely sophisticated mechanisms by which the school system contributes to reproducing the structure of the distribution of cultural capital and, through it, the social structure (and this, only to the extent to which this relational structure itself, as a system of positional differences and distances, depends upon this distribution) to the ahistorical view that society reproduces itself mechanically, identical to itself, without transformation or deformation, and by excluding all individual mobility. It was no doubt easier, once such a radical simplification had been effected, to charge this theory with being incapable of accounting for change or with ignoring the resistance of the dominated—so many (mis)interpretations that a close reading of the book, along with the empirical research in which it was grounded, suffices to put aside.

To appraise fully the effort that resulted in *Reproduction*, one must have in mind what the dominant

theoretical mood of the 1960s was. (Indeed, a full appreciation of the place of *Reproduction* among works in the sociology of education, which proliferated rapidly in the US during the 1970s,^{6,7} in the direction it had charted, requires that one pay notice to the original date of publication of this book and of its companion volume, *The Inheritors*.)¹ The word "mutation" had become the buzzword of many sociologists, particularly among those who claimed to dissect the effects of the new mass media; others prophesied the vanishing of social differences and "the end of ideology"; others still, firm believers in the extraordinary "mobility" of American society, proclaiming the demise of class, held that ascription was finally and forever giving way to "achievement." Contrary to all these notions, *Reproduction* sought to propose a model of the social mediations and processes that—unbeknownst to the agents of the school system (teachers, students, and their parents) and oftentimes against their will—tended to ensure the transmission of cultural capital across generations and to stamp preexisting differences in inherited cultural capital with the meritocratic seal of academic consecration by virtue of the special symbolic potency of the title (credential). Functioning in the manner of a huge classificatory machine that inscribes changes within the purview of the structure, the school helps to make and to impose the legitimate exclusions and inclusions that form the basis of the social order.

In a forthcoming book entitled *The School Nobility*, which brings together the results of a whole array of investigations, some of which were undertaken well prior to writing the "work of youth" that *Reproduction* is, I will demonstrate that educational titles or credentials fulfill, in a different historical context, a social function analogous to that which befell nobility titles in earlier times. The specific symbolic efficacy of educational titles lies in that they not only guarantee technical competency but also, as the public attestation of "gifts" or individual "merits," consecrate a true social essence. Whence the ambiguity of the "progress" that has taken us from the collective and hereditary statuses of the nobility, in the strict sense of the word, to today's school nobility. If the degree of achievement and of technical proficiency actually required of the dominant has never been higher, it nevertheless remains that they continue to stand in close statistical relationship to social origins, to birth, that is, to ascription. And, in societies that claim to recognize individuals only as equals in right, the educational system and its modern nobility only contribute to disguise, and thus legitimize, in a more subtle way, the arbitrariness of the distribution of powers and privileges that perpetuates itself through the socially uneven allocation of academic titles.

1. Bourdieu P & Passeron J-C. *The inheritors: French students and their relation to culture.* Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1979. 158 p. (Cited 110 times.)
2. Bourdieu P, Passeron J-C & de Saint Martin M. *Rapport pédagogique et communication.* Paris, France: Mouton, 1965. 127 p. (Cited 20 times.)
3. Bourdieu P. *Outline of a theory of practice.* Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1977. 248 p. (Cited 270 times.)
4. ———. *Distinction: a social critique of the judgement of taste.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984. (Cited 190 times.)
5. Cicourel A V, Jennings K H, Jennings S H M, Letter K C W, MacKay R, Mehan H & Roth D R. *Language use and school performance.* New York: Academic Press, 1974. 368 p. (Cited 55 times.)
6. Collins R. *The credential society: an historical sociology of education and stratification.* New York: Academic Press, 1979. 222 p. (Cited 190 times.)
7. Bowles S & Gintis H. *Schooling in capitalist America: educational reform and the contradictions of economic life.* New York: Basic Books, 1976. 340 p. (Cited 935 times.)

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