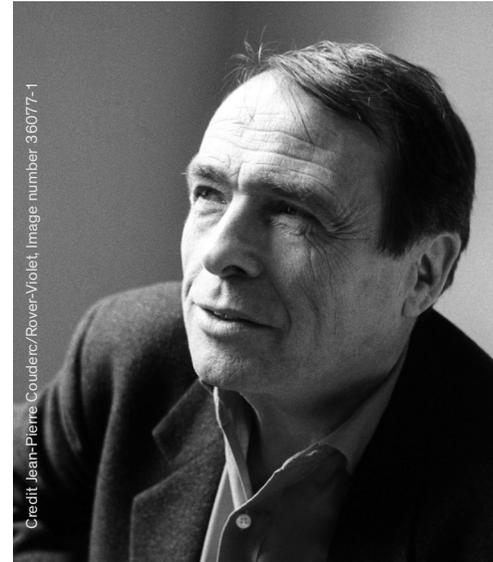


Pierre Bourdieu: Transformation Societies and the Middle Class

Eva Barlösius
(Translated by David Antal)

This article reconstructs Pierre Bourdieu's *œuvre* from his interest in transformation societies. The focus is on fundamental change in the objective structure of societies, a common characteristic of all three he treated in depth—Algerian in the 1950s and French in the 1960s and late 1900s. Bourdieu asked what uncertainties and miseries people feel when their *habitus* is overtaken by rapid change in objective structure. He concluded that their experience often results in a hysteresis effect and a split *habitus* and that members of the middle class in particular, because of their uncertain position in the social structure, suffer from both phenomena.



Pierre Bourdieu (1930-2002), French sociologist in March 1993

Keywords: Bourdieu; Algerian Society; Habitus; Middle Class; Trajectory

Algeria – The Key to Bourdieu's Opus

Pierre Bourdieu ranks indisputably as one of sociology's classic figures. His work stands out in the compendia of sociological theories, the rankings of the discipline's leading thinkers, and university syllabuses everywhere (Barlösius, "Klassiker im Goldrahmen"). When it comes to understanding the body of literature produced by a mind of this caliber, two questions have proven especially apt: what issue underlies the many individual studies uniting them into an

œuvre? And what experiences drove its author?

For Pierre Bourdieu the correct answer to the second question is clear: his years in Algeria (1958-1960). It was there, as he later wrote himself, that he underwent a profound intellectual conversion from a Parisian philosopher to an ethnologist and sociologist. It was also there, while investigating Algerian society, that he developed his most important concepts, which became the groundwork for his entire sociological contribution. They include the concept of *habitus*, which came to him through his studies on Algerian workers and peasants. These encounters also went a long way to shaping Bourdieu's empirical conception of social class, particularly that of the middle class, although the term scarcely appears in his study of Algeria. This influence accounts especially for the import Bourdieu attributed to the role that occupational qualification plays in the assignment of social class.

For Bourdieu, the characteristic that most clearly differentiated Algerian and French society at that time was presumably Algeria's vast labor surplus and the great ensuing arbitrariness in who was given a job. He observed that formal schooling and occupational training were essential if people were to escape the randomness of income and that regular income was the

first step toward comprehending that the future is modifiable. The significance of occupation explains much of the reason that Bourdieu used it as the key category of social classification in his later empirical studies, such as *Distinction* and *The Weight of the World*.

Another important concept Bourdieu drew from his work on Algeria was life trajectory. Arguing that a livelihood must first be secured in order then to focus its activities consciously on the future, Bourdieu derived both his critique of a rational concept of action and his concept of a *life trajectory* based on meaningful interpretation. As he learned in Algeria, people cannot take considered action and try to shape the future rationally until they have a grip on the present (Bourdieu, “La Hantise du chômage”).

Unlike the second question, the first one—whether Bourdieu’s complete opus is based on a question underlying all of his studies—cannot be answered so definitively. As with every great body of literature, Pierre Bourdieu’s oeuvre can be reconstructed from various questions. The fact that it can be understood from a new or different angle again and again ranks it among the classics. Sometimes the ensuing interpretations may seem overwrought. This impression is certainly not true of the perspective this paper takes on

Bourdieu’s writings on transformation societies. He, himself, used that term to denote societies undergoing a profound transformation. He focused on the accompanying fundamental changes in socially created and legitimated behavioral dispositions—that is, on the challenges to habitus. Looking at the studies by Bourdieu in this light makes it apparent that each of the three societies he treated in depth was going through transformation and that this facet was precisely what piqued his interest. His studies on Algeria traced the transition from a largely precapitalist, peasant society to one forced into capitalism by colonialization (Bourdieu, *Outline; Algeria*). In *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*—his major analysis of French society of the 1960s—he showed that the typical middle class life trajectory, which guaranteed social ascendance via the educational system, had become fragile. Lastly, in *Weight of the World: Social Suffering in Contemporary Society*, his point was to illustrate the symptoms of misery that were caused by the dissolution of occupational and socio-structural modes of recruitment in the wake of the French government’s turn to neoliberal economic policies.

In all three cases, Bourdieu described change in objective structures such as that in economic processes and government

institutions. However, he concentrated mainly on asking what uncertainties and miseries people feel when their habitus is overtaken by rapid change in objective structure. This experience may be due to their having landed in a social position so unlike their previous experience or expectations that their habitus does not fit the changed objective conditions in the new class of trajectories. Bourdieu called this phenomenon the *hysteresis effect*, meaning the inability to process and evaluate historical, but also individual, crises according to previously formed categories of perception, appreciation, and comprehension that are linked to one’s social origins. Or, the experience may arise because people become caught in the maelstrom of occupational and socio-structural crises of reproduction, entrapment through which a future of certainty and security once promised by society is dragged into uncertainty and vulnerability. The result is inner tension—a cleft, or split, habitus (Bourdieu et al.). The dispositions, expectations, and self-demands rooted in it stem from the past and are incompatible with present social structures. What characterizes habitus, its harmonization with the social world without explicit harmony, is lost. In its stead contradictions and discrepancies open up and are reflected deep within the individual. They

are experienced as personal tragedies and not as what they are, namely, discontinuities and contradictions ensuing from changes in life trajectory, especially from social transformations.

Bourdieu's Life Trajectory

Such experiences were by no means unfamiliar to Bourdieu himself. He experienced and described his path in life as one determined by many different transformations. He could not foresee the consequences that the multiple changes had on his life trajectory, such as those from the countryside to the city, from a lower middle class background to intellectual circles, from philosophy (the most prestigious discipline) to sociology (which has the lowest scientific reputation in the academic hierarchy, as Bourdieu scoffed) (Jurt 11). They called upon him to distance himself socially and culturally from his origins, instilling him with a perpetual feeling of strangeness (Barlösius, *Pierre Bourdieu*). Despite Bourdieu's oft-stated reluctance to describe his course in life, in the end he finally did so. For many years he declined to write an autobiography because an enterprise like that would bring about the "biographical illusion" that the life trajectory follows a coherent line and that all the steps and turns are meaningfully interrelated. Everything

Bourdieu did in sociology, including his autobiographically conceived *Sketch for a Self-Analysis*, was aimed at dispelling such biographical illusions, which ignore the discontinuities and social contingencies in life as it is actually lived.

In that work he drew on his own sociological concepts to reflect on his intellectual development, particularly the road he traveled to sociology, through France's elite schools. Time and again he cited his experiences in Algeria as what blazed the trail for his understanding of the sociologist's trade. He spent the years from 1955 to 1960 there, first in military service, then as an assistant at the University of Algiers, where he began studying the peasant society of the Kabyle people. The work was foreign to him, both thematically and methodologically, for he had planned to write his dissertation in philosophy on the time structures of emotional life. What culminated from this was instead his writings on Algerian society, *Algeria 1960: The Disenchantment of the World; Le déracinement: la crise de l'agriculture traditionnelle en Algérie*, written with Abdelmalek Sayad; salient parts of his *Outline of a Theory of Practice*; and myriad essays.

The peasant society in the Kabyle region was not as alien to Bourdieu as one might expect. On the contrary, it proved to be familiar, for it reminded him of the rural

society in which he had grown up. His father had come from the peasant milieu and worked as a postman in the secluded village of Béarn, which Pierre had left while still a schoolboy to go to boarding school in Pau, the nearest town. From there the young Bourdieu had gone to Paris to attend the preparatory class of the famous Lycée Louis le Grand and then eventually entered an elite institution of higher education, the École Normale Supérieure. He had experienced the long road from a small, solitary locality to the intellectual center of France not only as geographical distance but also, primarily, as a journey dissociating him from his own cultural and social origins. It was his Grand Tour into the intellectual and social unknown. He discovered that the Kabylie and his original homeland had much in common. He may have been an outsider to the peasants in the Kabylie, but they were not so to him. When he wrote about the uprooting of the Kabyle peasants, it was therefore from the viewpoint of what to him had become remote proximity. In retrospect, he said of these years that Algeria "enabled me to accept myself" (qtd. in Schultheis and Frisinghelli 48). The period in Algeria and his research on peasant society there helped him to come to terms with his feeling of strangeness in Parisian intellectual circles. It helped him complete his march

through the elite French institutions successfully—from the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (EHESS) to the zenith, the Collège de France.

Transformation of Precapitalist Peasant Habitus

Turning to the three transformation societies, I will now address change in economic structures. What contradictions and discrepancies does it create in habitus and how does it devalue and even destroy the life path and social position that society used to promise? The essays in *Algeria 1960* began with the more or less intact traditions of the precapitalist economy framing the rural milieu of peasants. In these studies, Bourdieu asked which transformations the rural milieu was exposed to by the capitalization of the economy, which was often brutally imposed by the colonial power. His sociological intention was to present examples demonstrating that economic structures and habitus do not change in the same rhythm, that behavioral dispositions by no means adapt automatically to a new economy, and that economic and social disparity are the reasons why.

In his work on the Algerian transformation, he was able to show the methodological and analytical power of the habitus concept empirically for the first time. He juxtaposed it with the claim surrounding the concept of *homo economicus*. Bourdieu countered that economic practices do not derive from such a theoretically conceived ideal, that they are instead determined by “real man, who is made by the economy” and that this man practices “economic rationality” (Bourdieu, *Algeria 2*) consistent with his class condition. The concept of habitus is designed to illustrate precisely that stance.

[The] practices (both economic and non-economic) of each agent have as their common root the relation he objectively maintains, through the mediation of his habitus which is itself the product of a definite type of economic conditions, with the objective and collective future which defines his class situation. (2)

This quotation defines some of the hallmarks of the habitus concept, the principal ones of which I explicitly repeat because they often receive too little attention. Habitus does not determine the practices; it sets forth forms of practice but not specific action. It is the product of societal and economic structures and of a collective history—an understated aspect in the above quotation, which mentions only the collective future. An additional matter is the use of the habitus concept in sociology. Bourdieu repeatedly stresses that he is concerned with a methodological use of habitus as a mediating concept. Methodologically, habitus “enables us to get beyond the abstract oppositions between the subjective and objective, the conscious and the unconscious” (92). In other words, sociology need not remain theoretically stuck in these oppositions; it can empirically study how they interact in social practice (Barlösius, *Pierre Bourdieu* 45-76).

Transition to a capitalist, urbane world requires a sweeping transformation of precapitalist peasant habitus. It is not just the economic practices that have to change, as presumed in the concept of *homo economicus*, but the noneconomic ones as well. That shift calls for a change in the schemes of perception, appreciation, and comprehension rooted in habitus. They include “amicable agreement,” the only convention acknowledged by the peasant world’s “ethic of honour” and the only one based on “good faith” (Bourdieu, *Algeria* 14). It proves absurd if measured by the yardstick of economic rationality. The schemes also encompass notions of the future that require practices based on cyclical time to yield to practices that assert a future constructed by calculation (8). Whereas production by the peasants is keyed to the farming year, which informs their understanding of time and the fu-

edly stresses that he is concerned with a methodological use of habitus as a mediating concept. Methodologically, habitus “enables us to get beyond the abstract oppositions between the subjective and objective, the conscious and the unconscious” (92). In other words, sociology need not remain theoretically stuck in these oppositions; it can empirically study how they interact in social practice (Barlösius, *Pierre Bourdieu* 45-76).

Transition to a capitalist, urbane world requires a sweeping transformation of precapitalist peasant habitus. It is not just the economic practices that have to change, as presumed in the concept of *homo economicus*, but the noneconomic ones as well. That shift calls for a change in the schemes of perception, appreciation, and comprehension rooted in habitus. They include “amicable agreement,” the only convention acknowledged by the peasant world’s “ethic of honour” and the only one based on “good faith” (Bourdieu, *Algeria* 14). It proves absurd if measured by the yardstick of economic rationality. The schemes also encompass notions of the future that require practices based on cyclical time to yield to practices that assert a future constructed by calculation (8). Whereas production by the peasants is keyed to the farming year, which informs their understanding of time and the fu-

ture, the capitalist economy is marked by a “much longer production cycle” and “presupposes the constitution of a mediated abstract future, with rational calculation to make up for the absence of an intuitive grasp of the process as a whole” (10). If amicable agreement or notions of cyclical time continue—for they are habituated and highly valued—a hysteresis effect will arise as the new economic processes overtake traditional habitus.

A person cannot deliberately decide to dispense with the schemes of perception, appreciation, and comprehension that are rooted in habitus. Nor can a person exchange them for others that are adapted to the code of the capitalist economy and, in particular, for those that permit long-term planning of the future. It was imperative to Bourdieu that his studies of Algerian transformation society were able to document empirically that actors beneath a certain level of economic security are unable to respond by embracing the future and projecting their life trajectory into it. To do so, they must have job security and at least a minimal level of regular income. Because most of the people he observed lacked these two essentials, they slipped into a split habitus. They learned that their practiced mode of social and economic reproduction was no longer in step with the times. But their class situation made it

impossible for them to appropriate a fitting mode of action, which necessitates investment in formal schooling, occupational training and, hence, time. That investment constitutes the core feature of the habitus that characterizes the emerging middle class in Algerian society. This attribute leads to the next transformation society, France in the 1960s.

Middle Class Life Trajectory

In *Distinction*, Bourdieu also studied the question of what the consequences are when an enormous discrepancy grows between past and the present conditions of existence, or, which amounts to the same thing, between a social trajectory and the modal (typical) trajectory for the group in question. He focused on the protection that afforded the sociostructural reproduction of the middle class. Its members place great importance on the educational system because they acquire from it the cultural capital that gives them access to the occupations that safeguard the sociostructural positioning of their class. The repeated mention of the middle class in the previous passages invites explanation of what Bourdieu takes social class to mean and why he finds the concept so significant. To him it is above all a product of social struggle against inequalities and injustices (Bourdieu, “Social Space and the

Genesis of Groups”). He carries this contested social past within him at all times. Discussion of whether and how sociologists are to apply the concept therefore always has a political quality (Bourdieu, *The Social Structures*). By describing a social relationship, the term social class ensures that the relational nature of social reality is ever present in the mind—an advantage for sociology. That presence, according to Bourdieu, is precisely what recommends its use in the discipline. One of his basic assumptions is that “the real is relational,” so “one must think relationally” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 228). Social class indicates a sociostructural position relative to other positions and thereby determines relational place within it.

However, the fixed association of social class with social struggle also complicates things for sociologists. They must beware of building on preconceived assumptions about the social world. Bourdieu avoids the problem by distinguishing empirically between “objective” (“theoretical” or “logical”) social classes and “real” social classes. The objective social classes are “the set of agents who are placed in homogeneous conditions of existence imposing homogeneous conditionings and producing homogeneous systems of dispositions capable of generating similar practices” (Bourdieu, *Distinction* 95). The real social

classes are relationally “defined by the mutual exclusion, or distinction, of [social] positions” (Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations* 135), for the sociostructural positioning follows from it, with occupation playing a highly prominent role.

In *Distinction* (1984) Bourdieu underlines that “the modal trajectory is an integral part of the system of factors constituting the class” (104). Trajectory is understood to mean more than just the temporal sequence of phases in life. In particular, it also contains the idea that a person has a notion of his or her own position in the social world, that is, the position that one strives to achieve for oneself and that seems to be promised by society if one meets the corresponding requirements. For the middle class of postwar French society, these requirements consisted, as previously mentioned, of investing in education and acquiring educational degrees in order to strive for an occupational position commensurate with membership in the middle class. But in the 1950s and 1960s the country’s once sociostructurally closed educational institutions were opened not only to members of the middle class but increasingly also to the working class and the peasant milieu. The change resulted in the inflation and, ultimately, a devaluation of educational degrees. Describing this process, Bourdieu commented that “the

dialectic of devaluation and compensation thus tends to feed upon itself” (“Social Space and the Genesis of Groups” 129). It takes time to develop a habitual grasp of the sociostructural impacts that the devaluation of educational degrees has on a person’s envisioned life trajectory. The habitus of the middle class, characterized as it is by reliance on educational capital as the mode of reproduction, encouraged the members of those classes to cling to outmoded educational paths. They did, thus producing a hysteresis effect. The habitus of the middle class preprogrammed them to see themselves as a generation cheated of its future (Bourdieu, *Distinction* 139).

Symptoms of Misery

In *The Weight of the World: Social Suffering in Contemporary Society*—the third transformation society—Bourdieu and his research group inquired into the discontinuities and contradictions caused by the neoliberal invasion. *The Weight of the World* presents a number of biographies, primarily from members of the middle class who, because of changes in economic structure and the realignment and dismantling of government institutions, had fallen upon hard times that they could perceive and describe only as misery. As with the work Bourdieu had done on the other two transformation societies, his study of

neoliberalism was less about material distress than about the misery that grows from being thrown into a life trajectory that triggers massive contradictions in habitus. These analyses were similar in another way as well: It was important to Bourdieu to emphasize that misery is subjectively perceived inferiority, just as material need is real and deep. Because this sociostructurally relative misery is anything but absolute poverty, it cannot be qualified; compared to people’s justified expectations of their life, it is disillusioning and ends in bitterness. These symptoms of misery originate in the objective contradictions that were embedded in the structures of the labor market, the public education system, social and integration policy, and many other areas in the course of the neoliberal turn. They produce incompatibilities between the mandate of institutions and the resources that the government provides to meet it. When the state’s objectives are thwarted, however, the actors employed in the institutions—usually members of the middle class—feel the failure to be their own. This response of government employees leads to a growing conflict within them, from this they find themselves straddling two systems of demand and representation. At work, in schools, in suburbs, and in social work, they are confronted with daily exi-

Eva Barlösius

is Professor of Sociology with a focus on social inequality and social structural analysis at the Leibniz University of Hanover. For several years she has been working on and with Bourdieu's theory of habitus and social space. Her current research interests include the sociology of food, social science studies and the sociological conception of public services and infrastructure. She is the coordinator of the Master's Program on "Science and Society" at the Leibniz University.

email: e.barloesius@ish.uni-hannover.de

gencies compelling action and intervention for which they have neither the resources nor the instruments. They are therefore bound to fail in their effort to meet the state's responsibility. At the same time, these employees are representatives of the state, are perceived as such, and thus stand locally for the power that is held responsible for the misery. They have to unite both dimensions in their person, an objectively impossible feat. "What could really change the situation [they are] being asked to change does not depend on [them], whereas what does depend on [them] cannot really change anything" (Bourdieu et al. 190). This paradox is not addressed in society; rather, it is displaced into their job. It is thereby subjectified, that is, internalized deep inside their person. They must cope with "the lie of the institution," (424) and therein lies the root of their misery.

Middle Class: Hysteresis Effect and Split Habitus

In all three transformation societies habitus is being overtaken by the structural processes of change. The actors are doing everything correctly according to their habitus. They are observing their honor code, investing in their education, and going about their assigned occupational tasks responsibly. Nevertheless, their situation is tough. What they have in common

is that they experience their failure personally and that it is not possible for them to make sense of it in terms of what lies behind it: economic structural change combined with a devaluation of their past life trajectory and what used to be their socially and economically protected and respectable position within the social structure. In the three transformation societies that Bourdieu studied, it is presumably no coincidence that members of the middle class are the ones suffering most from the hysteresis effect and split habitus. The middle class is that social class consisting of "grey areas, ambiguously located in the social structure, inhabited by individuals whose trajectories are extremely scattered" (Bourdieu, *Distinction* 106). Yet it is often also the one from which the groups driving processes of social change are recruited. Its sociostructural position may be well provided for, but in the web of class structure, the middle class is forever embattled and under constant pressure to prove its legitimacy. For the struggle over social recognition and symbolic capital rages with particular intensity at the center of society—the place of incessant change, continual differentiation, and pronounced aspirations for distinction.

→ Cited Works

Barlösius, Eva. "Klassiker im Goldrahmen: Ein Beitrag zur Soziologie der Klassiker." *Leviathan* 32.4 (2004): 514-42. Print.

___. *Pierre Bourdieu: Eine Einführung*. Frankfurt/M.: Campus, 2011. Print.

Bourdieu, Pierre. *Algeria 1960: The Disenchantment of the World: The Sense of Honour: The Kabyle House or the World Reversed. Essays*. Trans. Richard Nice. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979. Print.

___. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*. Trans. Richard Nice. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984. Print.

___. "La Hantise du chômage chez l'ouvrier algérien: Proletariat et système colonial." *Sociologie du travail* 4 (1962): 313-31. Print.

___. *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Trans. Richard Nice. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977. Print.

___. *Pascalian Meditations*. Trans. Richard Nice. Chicago: Stanford University Press, 2000. Print.

___. *Sketch for a Self-Analysis*. Trans. Richard Nice. Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2008. Print.

___. "Social Space and the Genesis of Groups." *Theory and Society* 14.6 (1985): 723-44. Print.

___. *The Social Structures of the Economy*. Trans. Chris Turner. Hoboken: Blackwell, 2005. Print.

Bourdieu, Pierre, and Abdelmalek Sayad. *Le Déracinement: La Crise de l'agriculture traditionnelle en Algérie*. Paris: Mounit, 1964. Print.

Bourdieu, Pierre, and Loïc Wacquant. *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*. Trans. Loïc Wacquant. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992. Print.

Bourdieu, Pierre, et al. *The Weight of the World: Social Suffering in Contemporary Society*. Trans. P. Parkhurst Ferguson. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999. Print.

Jurt, Joseph, ed. *Pierre Bourdieu: Forschen und Handeln/Recherche et action*. Freiburg: Organe Press, 2004. Print.

Schultheis, Franz, and Christine Frisinghelli, eds. *Pierre Bourdieu in Algerien: Zeugnisse der Entwurzelung*. Graz: Camera Austria, 2003. Print.