

Artículos / Articles

'The more things change the more they stay the same': The continuing relevance of Bourdieu and Passeron's *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture* "Cuanto más cambian las cosas, más permanecen igual": la relevancia continua de *La reproducción de Bourdieu y Passeron*

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ABSTRACT

The publication of Bourdieu and Passeron's *Reproduction* had a mixed response. On the one hand the work was criticised for its determinism and pessimistic prognosis of the possibilities of educational change and, on the other hand, praised for its complex analysis of the relationship between education and class inequalities, and the workings of class domination through the educational system. This paper explores the reception *Reproduction*, and its companion text *The Inheritors* received before examining the contribution they have made, and continue to make, to understandings of social class inequalities in education. It argues that the work has continuing significance in contemporary England just as it had in 1960s France. As well as examining the relevance of *Reproduction* for the twenty-first century, it also focuses on the potential of Bourdieu and Passeron's analysis for enabling animated and agentic conceptualisations of educational and social reproduction by drawing on recent case-study data from English schools. However, it also argues that the lack of sufficient questioning of the dominant educational code, as well as the absence of any moral dimensions of class culture make their study a work in progress which needed the insights of Bourdieu's later work to bring its analysis to fruition.

Keywords: Reproduction; Structure; agency; resistance; social class; educational inequalities.

RESUMEN

La publicación de *La reproducción*, de Bourdieu y Passeron, tuvo respuestas diversas. Por un lado, el trabajo fue criticado por su determinismo y su pronóstico pesimista sobre las posibilidades del cambio educativo y, por otro, alabado por su complejo análisis de la relación entre la educación y las desigualdades de clase, y de los mecanismos de la dominación de clase a través del sistema educativo. Este artículo explora la recepción de *La reproducción*, y de su complemento, *Los herederos*, antes de examinar cuál fue, y sigue

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siendo, su contribución a la comprensión de las desigualdades de clase social en educación. Defiende que este trabajo sigue teniendo tanta relevancia en Inglaterra contemporánea como la que tuvo en Francia en los años 1960. Además de analizar la relevancia de *La reproducción* en el siglo XXI, el artículo se centra en el potencial del análisis de Bourdieu y Passeron para producir conceptualizaciones de la reproducción educativa y social vivas y con lugar para la agencia, partiendo de estudios de casos recientes de centros escolares ingleses. No obstante, también defiende que la falta de un cuestionamiento suficiente del código educativo dominante, así como la ausencia de dimensión moral de la cultura de clase, hacen de su estudio un trabajo en elaboración que necesita de las aportaciones posteriores de Bourdieu para fructificar.

Palabras clave: Reproducción; estructura; agencia; resistencia; clase social; desigualdades educativas.

INTRODUCTION: A PERSONAL RESPONSE

The first critique I read of Bourdieu was [Richard Jenkins' \(1992\)](#) scathing evaluation of *Reproduction* in his book *Pierre Bourdieu*. My immediate reaction was 'oh no I feel drawn to Bourdieu's research because like me he is biased and subjective. It is not just a working-class background we have in common but methodological and conceptual flaws, probably because of the anger we share at the way the educational system works. The main difference I noted was that he had mastered academic discourse and perfected a dense and highly stylised scholarly way of writing of which I could only dream. Since then, I have read Bourdieu's books many times, as well as all the critiques I can find of his work, and my assessment has shifted. It is Bourdieu's passionate partiality that I value above all, while his obscure, repetitive and at times deliberately mystificatory writing often feels like a hurdle to overcome in order to reach often deeply buried sociological insights. But despite the, at times, impenetrable and repetitive prose, *Reproduction* continues to have a salience that is even more timely in the 2020s than when it was first published in 1970. It remains one of the few coherent accounts of the central role that schools have in reproducing social and cultural inequalities from one generation to another, whilst allowing for human agency ([Harker, 1984](#), p. 117). In this article I outline the major strengths and weaknesses of *Reproduction* before drawing on the case study of 21st century English education to make a case for its continuing relevance for understandings of educational inequalities and, in particular, working-class experiences of education.

Reproduction is the Bourdieu book I enjoyed the least at first reading. It was dry, dull, and overly pedantic. Yet, I welcomed its honesty and realism at a time when political and social narratives ceaselessly peddled individual agency and aspiration, assuming not only the efficacy of meritocracy but also its unchallenged position as the lynchpin of educational justice. At the beginning of *Reproduction*, [Bourdieu & Passeron \(1977](#), p. xv) write that not only are 'the ruling ideas in every age, the ideas of the ruling class, but the ruling ideas themselves reinforce the rule of that class'. So it has been with the ideology of meritocracy which enables our ruling class to consecrate their own privileged status while legitimating the educational exclusion of the working classes. In the decades following the publication of *Reproduction* structural or structuralist arguments were increasingly abandoned. It was claimed that they assumed a far too rigid causal determinism in social life ([Sewell, 1992](#)). Understandings of education and the wider social world as reproductive came to be seen as both passé and unduly pessimistic. In their place came a growing emphasis on agency and the fully agentic subject which allowed a wholesale investment in meritocracy as the only answer to educational inequalities. *Reproduction* was a much-read book in the UK but its central thesis of how privilege

is maintained through the educational system had little if any impact on the field of English educational policy subsequently. As [Backer & Cairns \(2021, p. 5\)](#) state, 'social reproduction in education became an important historical step in educational thinking, but one from which many have moved on'. Yet, my reading was that *Reproduction*, maybe dully, but surely and consistently, destroyed the myth of meritocracy for once and for all.

In the book, Bourdieu and Passeron painstakingly map out the myriad ways in which privilege is misread as merit. Central to their argument is that the educational system sanctifies privilege by ignoring it, and treating pupils as if they are all equal, despite very differing mixes of economic, social and cultural capital. And, since I first read *Reproduction* over 30 years ago the unfaltering belief in social mobility and meritocracy as the answer to educational inequalities has intensified, particularly in the UK and the US. There has been a pervasive internalisation of meritocratic norms ([Littler, 2018](#); [Friedman et al., 2021](#)). Yet, recent research shows that less than 1% of people born in the bottom income quintile in America succeed in moving into the top quintile ([Economic Policy Institute, 2017](#)), while in the UK only 10% of those from working class backgrounds succeed in moving into higher professional and managerial occupations ([Friedman & Laurison, 2019](#); [Social Mobility Commission, 2021](#)). This is partly a consequence of dominant cultural narratives in both countries that locate lack of agency in the individual rather than structural and institutional failures for the perpetuation of educational inequalities. A political discourse of raising aspirations has become hegemonic without any attempt by our political elites to equalise resources. Rather, in both countries, the trend has been for the gap between rich and poor to widen ([Office for National Statistics \[ONS\], 2021](#); [Horowitz et al., 2020](#)). As [Stefan Collini \(2010\)](#) has written, England has become the aspiration nation, obsessed with the fantasy of triumphing over adversity in the face of rigid structural constraints and lack of resources.

It was partly in refutation of such a dominant and dissembling ideology that I was attracted to Bourdieu and Passeron's continuing focus on reproduction. Despite the valorisation of agency, the obsession with social mobility, and the romanticisation of resistance that permeates modern mainstream academic and political thinking, Bourdieu and Passeron lay out in both *Reproduction* and *The Inheritors* not only the indomitable power of reproductive forces but how they are enabled by everyday activities and interactions in schools and classrooms. It was such a challenge to complacent status quo reasoning that everything was going to be alright, and if it wasn't then it was down to individuals making the wrong choices that I wanted to integrate and develop in my own work. I also needed to understand how, regardless of the fervent struggles of people like myself to bring about progressive changes in both education and wider society, the more we strive to change things the more they stay the same. It appeared that far too often for far too many English people an unjust but familiar world feels safer than a fairer strange one.

Reproduction exposed what [Frye \(2019, p. 721\)](#) calls 'the myth of agency' well before meritocracy became hegemonic in American and English societies as the way of tackling educational inequalities. Although written in 1970, it provides a much-needed repudiation at a point in history when the notion that a specific group deserves their fate because of their own behaviour ([Lamont, 2019](#)) is all-pervasive. *Reproduction* scrupulously laid out the institutional processes through which educational inequality is legitimated in marked contrast to prevalent neo-liberal individualisation processes underpinned by the premise that 'individuals take responsibility for personal misfortunes and unanticipated events in a culturally binding mode of attribution' ([Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 2002, p. 24](#)). But, in claiming agency at the individual level, explicit analyses of structures of power are relinquished. We are all expected to be empowered choice-making agents in the 21st century ([Harris & Dobson, 2015](#)), regardless of our social location and level of resources. As a consequence, the poor are subject to punishing fantasies perpetuated by the rich and powerful from the Obamas ([Obama 2018](#); [Obama 2020](#)) to [David Cameron \(2012\)](#). Their injunctions to 'reach the stars' and 'follow your dreams' present a self-unencumbered

by constraints; a self-free to become whatever we desire. The analysis in Bourdieu and Passeron's texts remains one of the best antidotes to this cruel fiction.

This is not to endorse all aspects of the analysis presented in *Reproduction* and *The Inheritors*. There are features of Bourdieu & Passeron's (1977; 1979) work that I find difficult and unconvincing. In particular, the focus on rational pedagogy in *Inheritors* (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1979, pp. 73-74) appears to authorise dominant knowledge as the knowledge working class children should be inculcated into. Dismissing what they term 'the populist illusion', that the working classes could be supported educationally through schools validating working class culture, (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1979, p. 72), they argue that:

This could lead students to demand that the parallel cultures of the disadvantaged classes should be given the status of the culture taught by the school system. But it is not sufficient to observe that school culture is a class culture; to proceed as if it were only that, is to help it remain so. (Bourdieu & Passeron 1979, p. 72)

There are shades here of the promotion of 'powerful knowledge' (Young, 2009) that became popular among English educationalists, along with the view that class domination could be overcome by instilling the working classes with elite knowledge. However, by the time Bourdieu and Passeron came to write *Reproduction* (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977), they appear to have decided that the concept of rational pedagogy is unduly utopian:

...a perfectly rational PW – i.e. PW [Pedagogic Work] exerted ab novo in all domains on all the educable, taking nothing for granted from the outset, with the explicit goal of explicitly inculcating in all its pupils the practical principles of the symbolic mastery of practices which are inculcated by primary PA [Pedagogic Action] only within certain groups or classes, in short a type of PW everywhere substituting for the traditional mode of inculcation the programmed transmission of the legitimate culture – would not correspond to the pedagogic interests of the dominated classes (the hypothesis of the democratization of education through the rationalization of pedagogy). But the Utopian character of an education policy based on this hypothesis becomes apparent as soon as one observes that, quite apart from the built-in inertia of every educational institution, the structure of power relations prohibits a dominant PA from resorting to a type of PW contrary to the interests of the dominant classes who delegate its PAU [Pedagogic Authority] to it. (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977, pp. 53-54).

A rational pedagogy would not be sufficient to overcome unjust class relationships of power in wider society. As Burawoy & von Holdt (2012, p. 109) conclude 'what Bourdieu and Passeron present as the only conclusion in *The Inheritors* – true democratisation of education – they now dismiss as utopian”.

IN DEFENCE OF A MUCH-CRITICIZED TEXT

Many of the criticisms of *Reproduction* focused on what was seen to be a disparagement of the working classes and their ability to change their lives. Jeremy Lane (2006) argued that Bourdieu's theories were elitist and deterministic, and implied that oppressed individuals do not have sufficient reflexivity to liberate themselves. Henri Giroux (1983, p. 274), writing specifically about *Reproduction*, claimed that the book presents “a theory of reproduction that displays no faith in subordinate classes and groups, no hope in their ability or willingness to reinvent and reconstruct the conditions under which they live, work and learn”. But Giroux fails to sufficiently consider the widely varying range of choices available to different social classes. I have often argued that the working classes are left with the choices the upper and middle classes do not want to make (Reay, 2017). The limited opportunities and educational cruelties experienced by the working-classes are a result of choices. But those choices

are rarely of their own making. Rather, they are being made primarily by others with much greater economic and political power. As Bourdieu makes clear in a published interview with Loic Waquant,

The dominated, in any social universe, can always exert a certain force, inasmuch as belonging to a field means by definition that one is capable of producing effects in it (if only to elicit reactions of exclusion on the part of those who occupy its dominant positions) ... there is no denying that there exist dispositions to resist... [yet] the dominated seldom escape the antimony of domination" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 80).

However, 'the antimony of domination' co-exists with Bourdieu and Passeron's recognition in *Reproduction* that there are always exceptions that prove the rule. There will always be a small number of working classes who succeed educationally against the odds, although research shows us they are more likely to be found in more equal countries like Finland, Canada and Estonia than in England (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2019; 2021). In England educational success is more likely to be beyond the power of the dominated. Instead, their educational fate is being 'chosen' through the educational practices of the privileged in combination with the policies of an archaic, cruel and out-of-touch elite who govern only in their own interests. That careless elite are choosing with impunity to locate the responsibility for educational failure elsewhere, with the working classes themselves, while withholding fair access to the resources that enable educational success.

Critics also tended to overlook the element of specificity Bourdieu recognized in relation to his theoretical tool-kit. He viewed his concepts as thinking tools rather than as a straitjacket to be imposed on a different social context (Robbins, 2019). This is an acknowledgement of the socio-historical and spatial contingency of concepts, with Bourdieu arguing that whilst concepts such as habitus and symbolic violence may work effectively to illuminate a particular historical juncture and a particular geographical region, that does not mean they will function similarly at a future moment in time or in a different space (Bourdieu, 1985a). In response to critics, he asserted that his conceptual analyses were not to be considered

As theoretical treatises, meant solely to be read or commented upon, works that, like gymnastics handbooks, were intended for exercise, or even better, for putting into practice. One cannot grasp the most profound logic of the social world unless one becomes immersed in the specificity of an empirical reality". (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 271)

He maintained that because his texts were the products of the application of method, it was important to avoid the danger that they would be disseminated as if they were universally valid accounts of human reality. Rather, there was a degree of specificity about concepts such as habitus, misrecognition and doxa that arose out of the particular conditions of the construction of the concepts (Reay, 2019). As Bourdieu went on to assert in relation to his concepts:

The main thing is that they are not to be conceptualised so much as ideas, on that level, but as a method. The core of my work lies in the method and a way of thinking. To be more precise, my method is a manner of asking questions rather than just ideas. This, I think is a critical point. (Bourdieu, 1985b, quoted in Mahar, 1990).

Texts like *Reproduction* and *The Inheritors* were written to persuade and change readers' thinking but above all to question and destabilise orthodoxies regarding the educational system and the causes of educational inequalities.

John Goldthorpe (2007, p. 2) has been particularly dismissive of Bourdieu's work, arguing that 'the overarching theory of social reproduction can be shown to have serious inherent weaknesses and, further, to be overwhelmingly contradicted by

empirical evidence'. However, the evidence he cites, the research of [Halsey and his colleagues \(1980\)](#), has since been superseded. While Halsey et al found substantial, and predominantly upward, intergenerational educational mobility in England and Wales in the 1960s ([Goldthorpe, 2007](#), p. 14), more recent research in both the UK and the US shows declining rates of social mobility, with class privilege entrenched at every life stage ([Wright, 2019](#); [Song et al., 2020](#)). When asked to look back thirty years later on the contributions that *Reproduction* and *The Inheritors* had made, Bourdieu asserted:

The theoretical and empirical knowledge gained about the contribution that the educational system makes to the reproduction of the structure of the social space ...is endlessly confirmed in reality, in both France and in all contemporary societies. ([Bourdieu, 2000](#), p. 3).

Reflecting further on what had changed since the 1960s he differentiated between a working class who had been excluded from education, those who, in the language of *Reproduction*, often eliminated themselves, and the situation of increasing numbers of the working classes in the 1990s "condemned to a state of "excluded insiders", at once present and absent in an educational institution ill-equipped to receive them" ([Bourdieu 2000](#), p. 4). These 'excluded insiders', approximately 30 per cent of the English working classes ([DfE, 2021](#)), are now entering higher education in increasing numbers, although they predominate in low status universities, and often fail to achieve the same grades, graduate at the same rates, or gain employment and salaries at the same levels as their privileged peers ([Friedman & Laurison, 2019](#)). This move from self-elimination to excluded insider is just one illustration of Bourdieu's focus on 'structure as itself historically dynamic' ([Friedman & Savage, 2018](#), p. 71), and his recognition that "the very structures within which mobility takes place are themselves being continually reworked" ([Friedman & Savage, 2018](#), p. 72).

Contrary to repeated accusations that Bourdieu reified binaries in his work, particularly those of agency and structure, objective and subjective, reproduction and resistance ([Jenkins, 1982, 1992](#); [King, 2000](#); [Goldthorpe, 2007](#)), much of his scholarship has been an attempt to move beyond binaries, to reconcile problematic oppositions. Despite the title, *Reproduction*, no less than Bourdieu's other research, displays a preoccupation with the division between reproduction and transformation, and his efforts, particularly through the concept of habitus, to make sense of such dualities and begin to understand connections and synergies as well as tensions and divisions ([Medvetz & Sallaz, 2018](#)). In contrast to the rigidity of binaries, key to Bourdieu's concepts is their potential for highlighting unresolved conflicts and frictions in society rather than settled conditions or states of affairs. There is little of the rigidity of binaries he is accused of but rather a dynamic tension that holds mutually antagonistic forces in synergy. For Bourdieu, choices between agency and structure, submission and resistance are inevitably spurious. In a much quoted line he asserted that 'resistance can be alienating and submission can be liberating' ([Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992](#), p. 24). Rather, practices and situations are always defined by their intrinsically double skewed nature ([Wacquant, 1992](#)).

No doubt agents do have an active apprehension of the world. No doubt they do construct their vision of the world. But this construction is carried out under structural constraints... essentially the product of the internalisation of the structures of that world ([Bourdieu, 1989](#), p. 18).

For Bourdieu, the working classes are socialised by the economic and social conditions in which they live. Inevitably, this means they develop an accommodation to their circumstances which often leaves little space for dispositions of empowered resistance. It is this limited sphere for generative resistance that Bourdieu's critics seized on, and I address in the next section.

RESISTANCE WITHOUT RESULTS

One of the most sustained criticisms of *Reproduction* was that it failed to recognise working class resistance. As Paul Willis argued, *Reproduction* ‘takes no account of the continent of history, struggle and contestation and the field of creative collective self-making in the subordinate class’ (Willis, 1981, p. 49). Yet, the active cultural production of the working classes still reproduces the traditional inequitable class hierarchy. And Willis’ (1981) classic study *Learning to Labour* was an attempt to view the mechanisms of social reproduction through agency no less than *Reproduction* was. As a consequence, one of the main insights the reader gains from *Learning to Labour* is that resistance, whilst creative, subversive and personally transformative, in terms of wider structures of inequality, often ends up ‘going nowhere’. Despite myriad everyday acts of resistance that involve a lot of energy and creativity, ultimately working-class resistance works to re-constitute reproduction rather than enable transformation. Along with *Learning to Labour* many other ethnographies of working-class educational experiences portray schooling as a site of struggle (Charlesworth, 2000; Bright, 2011; Reay, 1998; Ball, 1981) but never sites of sufficient struggle to lead to systemic changes and structural transformation. In order for resistance to lead to change it has to have an impact on the field, and, in particular, the field of power, ‘a space of positions occupied by those possessing forms of capital to a very high degree’ (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 21). As a consequence, many acts of everyday resistance among the dominated might directly and indirectly challenge the rules of the game but without generating any influential field effects.

In 2009 Paul Willis wrote that in preference to Bourdieu’s analysis he would prefer “a somewhat more creative and collective agentive role for subordinate cultural actors unfolding over time and in concrete situations where they are not just subject to symbolic violence and species of self-blame but, through their cultural practices if not in words, actually ‘see into’ aspects of enclosing structures and ideologies but in ways which produce unexpected and ironic outcomes” (Sassatelli, Santoro, & Willis, 2009, p. 285). I too would prefer a more creative collective and empowered agentive role for the working classes, but in 2020s England we do not have one, and moreover little prospect of one in the future. It is important to understand why this is the case, and to identify the reactionary forces driving working class subordination. We might look to the declining membership and reduced power of trade unions, the erosion of the protective role of the welfare state, and the decline of the English industrial base. However, there also needs to be greater recognition of growing practices of control, discipline and subordination of the working classes in education (Reay, 2017), despite the prevalent focus on self-actualisation and aspiration. In our contemporary age of hyper-individualism and revered entrepreneurialism, the assertion that the working classes lack control over their life, and, furthermore, that they have negligible prospects of liberating themselves, have become ideas that many find difficult to fathom, or even distasteful. Yet, while the working classes have been engaged in many everyday acts of resistance over the fifty years since Bourdieu and Passeron wrote *Reproduction*, virtually none of them have had any influence on the macro fields of the educational system and educational policy. It is one thing to challenge educational domination, it is an entirely different thing to undo it. At the same time, it is important to recognise transformations at the micro-level of individual schools in very specific circumstances, such as School 21 in England (Baker, 2017), and La Paz school in Spain (Flecha & Soler, 2013), just as it is vital to acknowledge transformation at the level of the working-class individual, Bourdieu’s ‘exceptions that prove the rule. But neither add up to any significant change in the unequal relations between different social classes.

There are many campaigning and activist groups in society whose daily lives are ones of constant political struggle and activity in support of radical change to the lot of the working classes. Yet, while they do not accept that if you are born into a working-class background, you will have worse life chances, all their strivings have failed to change that inevitability. Rather, successful transformations in English society have been

recuperative conservative ones (Bourdieu in Fowler, 2020), rolling back the English state, and privatising huge swathes of the public sector, including education (West, 2021). In *To Kill a Mocking Bird*, Harper Lee (1960) argued that "real courage is when you know you're licked before you begin but you begin anyway and you see it through no matter what. You rarely win, but sometimes you do". Agency for many of the working classes, and the groups campaigning to better their circumstances, means acting and not achieving, striving but not succeeding. Understanding the reproductive nature of that struggle is at the heart of Bourdieu's research. As he asserted in a later interview, "it is nonsense to suggest I do not recognise the resistance of the dominated" (Bourdieu in Wacquant, 1993, p. 35). Rather, he goes on to argue that he wanted to challenge the populist mythology that 'the oppressed were always ready to rise up and overturn the oppression they faced' by "twisting the stick in the opposite direction" (p. 35). When we analyse Bourdieu's scholarship it is struggle rather than reproduction that captures its guiding tenet. His concept of field represents a social space characterised by competition and conflict. Social classes and other groups in society are constantly engaged in a struggle to realise their interests, to impose their view of the world as the dominant one over other social groups. Bourdieu's sociology is essentially relational rather than oppositional. And it illuminates how degrees of power and resource allocation almost always determine outcomes. In the next section I discuss the importance of relationality to Bourdieu and Passeron's analysis in *Reproduction*.

A RELATIONAL SOCIOLOGY OF EDUCATION

Bourdieu's work on reproduction can be seen as a 'frontal attack on the sacred sense of individuality' casting doubt on the longstanding perception, and ability of agents to be 'free' and 'conscious' (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 44). As Papilloud & Schultz (2018, p. 353) conclude, "Pierre Bourdieu's sociological work delivers a theory of action based on a relational scheme". In contrast to the cult of the individual, *Reproduction* focuses attention on how the pedagogic work of both families and teachers, rather than the ability and effort of individual students, shapes educational outcomes. It also illuminates the importance of home-school relationships, demonstrating how the school relies on the family, with educational transmission resting on direct familial transmission which it completes and ratifies (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). *Reproduction* underscores the enduring impact of pedagogic work in the family:

Insofar as PW is an irreversible process producing, in the time required for inculcation, an irreversible disposition, i.e. a disposition which cannot itself be repressed or transformed except by an irreversible process producing in turn a new irreversible disposition, primary PA (pedagogic action) (the earliest phase of upbringing), which is carried out by PW without any antecedent (primary PW), produces a primary habitus, characteristic of a group or class, which is the basis for the subsequent formation of any other habitus. (Bourdieu & Passeron 1977, p. 42).

There is a strong emphasis on the powerful 'class work' (Reay, 1998) carried out in the family in contrast to much educational research, then and since, that over-estimates the impact of schooling on educational attainment (Mortimore, 1993; Reynolds, 2010). It also emphasises the much greater efficacy of that work in privileged families with reserves of cultural, social, and economic capital. Highly effective upper and middle-class practices of social and educational closure (Flemmen et al, 2017) have detrimental, yet frequently denied, impacts on the educational opportunities of the working classes.

In earlier research (Reay, 1998) on parental involvement in schooling, I argued that there is an irony in collective action being associated with the working classes. Rather effective class action within the educational field has always been the province of the upper and middle classes. The individualist, capital-rich and self-interested activities of the dominant in society add up to a specific form of collective class action. A further

irony lies in who is doing this dirty work of class. It is primarily mothers, in particular middle-class mothers, who are at the front line of cultural reproduction, helping children with schoolwork, organising private tuition and enrichment activities, talking to teachers, and networking in order to uncover relevant information that will give their child 'a class advantage' (Lareau, 1989). Evident here, as Bourdieu & Passeron (1977) argue, are the ways in which familial and academic reproduction coalesce and compound one another. This symbiosis is key to educational and wider social reproduction. In putting their capitals to work, the privileged ensure, that despite the greater credentialing of the working classes over the last twenty years, the initial social class gaps in educational attainment are maintained (Weininger & Lareau, 2018).

But social class is not just indirectly relational, there are the often-invidious consequences of inter-class interactions within the educational system. Instead of the relentless focus on working class attitudes, behaviour and performance in education as key to tackling the social class attainment gap, there is a need for better understandings of how more powerful others treat them within the field. Bourdieu & Passeron (1977) discuss the excluding behaviour that emanates from the middle and upper classes in education, including teachers and academics, those with dominant capitals in the field. In doing so they draw attention to the role of those doing the excluding rather than seeing the problem as solely located in the socially-excluded. Lareau & Ferguson (2017, p. 14), have charted inter-class relations in US higher education, arguing that 'there is hostility of upper-middle-class students to students from working-class families, but this hostility has been largely ignored'. However, the hostility they describe can also be found at other stages of education and in other countries. The negative consequences are particularly evident in the demonization of predominantly working-class schools in England.

The 21st century has seen the development in England of a market driven, semi-privatised educational system that operates with a crude test-led system of attributing value, combined with the entrenchment of 'the tradition of competition for competition's sake' (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977, p. 148). This has resulted in the further devaluation and pathologisation of working-class students, but also the demonisation of the schools which these working-class students attend. In research with Helen Lucey (Reay, 2004) on educational choice, the middle classes talked of such schools as 'rubbish', 'bad', 'sink' and 'rough'. Much has been written about middle-class choice-making, including middle-class avoidance strategies of so-called 'sink' schools, but there is far less work on the repercussions for working class students of this stigmatisation of themselves and the schools they go to. One consequence was that working class students used the same pejorative terms to describe the schools they attend. In the following two quotes we can see the negative repercussions for working class learner identities of wider social judgements:

And I've been hearing that if you don't get into any of the good schools, they send you to one of the rubbish schools. In school I've been hearing everyone saying 'I hope I don't go to Chiltern' and stuff like that. So, I then thought that was really awful because all the kids there are bad and no good at learning. (George, white English, working class)

Deerpark is still going to be rubbish when it's changed... because there are still the same students and the students are crap. (Teyfik, Turkish, working class)

But George ends up at Chiltern while Teyfik goes to Deerpark, and both have to manage the 'impossible' balance between going to schools seen to be 'rubbish with crap students' and trying to be successful learners. This is an example of the "class racism" Bourdieu & Passeron argue in *Inheritors* (1979, p. 70) can be "flaunted without ever being seen for what it is". Such 'class racism', driving exclusions both between and within schools, needs to be unmasked and countered. And again, it is difficult to see how the working classes can experience their educational failure as anything other than "a personal destiny" (Bourdieu & Passeron 1979: 70) in the face of such powerful

judgements. Working class resistance in education, and beyond, is largely doomed to failure as long as the wider unequal power imbalances between the classes remains intact.

However, rather than examining the excluding behaviour and judgmental attitudes of the upper and middle classes, the emphasis today in England continues to be on the self-elimination of the working-class aspirant when examining cultural and social exclusions. As Bourdieu & Passeron (1979, p. 42) argue that 'the major thrust of the imposition of the dominant culture as legitimate culture comes from exclusion, which perhaps has the most symbolic force when it assumes the guise of self-exclusion'. Most critics have focused on the aspect of self-exclusion of the dominated, arguing Bourdieu & Passeron (1977) present an unduly deficit view of the working classes. There has been a relative neglect of Bourdieu and Passeron's emphasis on the excluding behaviours of the privileged. Yet, such an analysis challenges contemporary understandings of social exclusion which refuse to recognise social exclusion as both relational and as a general social problem that implicates the upper and middle classes as much as the working class. One of the key insights of *Reproduction* is that social class is about relations. We cannot understand class experiences in education and elsewhere without understanding relationships between the classes, as well as within them. It is this relational aspect of social class as key to inequalities that needs to be recuperated in order to understand the workings of class in the 21st century. Of course, Bourdieu's later work which introduced the concept of field to complement the concepts of capitals and habitus deployed in *Reproduction* gives Bourdieu's theory a dynamism that the rather static analysis in *Reproduction* lacked. But Bourdieu's later field analyses build on the insights of *Reproduction* rather than being a departure from them. Educational exclusion is just as much, if not more, a consequence of the middle and upper-class institutional choices and actions rather than being attributable to deficits or self-exclusion in the individual working-class student. Once this is recognized, it becomes clear that it is unjust class relations, including practices of upper and middle-class social closure, both inside and outside of the educational system, that should be the focus for radical change rather than the working-class individual.

Bourdieu & Passeron's (1977) focus on relations rather than things, processes rather than states is allied with the belief that binaries represent outmoded perceptions of which sociology must rid itself (Bourdieu, 1990). But at the same time, it is important to recognise that interactions mask the structures that are realised in them (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 126). The balance of power works to substantiate the existing status quo. As Derek Robbins argues, Bourdieu's worldview turns Rousseau's assertion on its head. 'It is not that we are born free but are everywhere in chains. On the contrary, we are born in chains and constantly strive to construct the functional fiction that we are free' (Robbins, 2006, p. 347). But this is especially true for the dominated who would benefit from a transformation of the current inequitable status quo, as opposed to those privileged by an unfair social and economic hierarchy who benefit from its continuation.

The focus on relationality and interaction allows *Reproduction* to posit a different relationship between structure and agency from the binary opposition that is hegemonic in political and wider social thinking today in which agency is seen to float free of structure. Contemporary political thinking presents the orthodoxy that all individuals can escape structural constraints (Spohrer et al., 2018). In contrast, in Bourdieu and Passeron's *Reproduction* agency is seen not as opposed to, but as constituent of and intertwined with structure. Its analysis shows how agency arises from individuals' control of resources, and is powerfully enabled and constrained by the level and types of resources they have access to. There is an explicit recognition that, while all members of society exercise some degree of agency in the conduct of their daily lives, that agency is very unequally distributed. Many of the disadvantaged are acting to little or no avail. Their hard work and striving in school results in failure not success. In the next section I draw on a case study from English education to illustrate how *Reproduction* is still relevant in providing an analytic lens on educational inequalities in the present.

ACADEMIES: REINFORCING THE AGENTIC MYTH IN ENGLISH EDUCATION WHILE REPRODUCING CLASS INEQUALITIES

Academies are self-governing, semi-privatised 'state' schools often with a corporate or charitable sponsor. They commonly share an ethos that epitomizes the agentic approach to English education, the fantasy everyone can reach the summit regardless of their very different levels of capitals. They are a particularly powerful exemplification of the relentless shaping through education of the competitive, constantly improving, self-interested subject (Kulz, 2017; Morrin, 2018; Kulz et al., 2022). Nearly all the academies I visited as part of research studies stretching over the first two decades of the 21st century had an aspirational mantra the students chanted. From 'I aspire, they aspire, we all aspire' to 'Reach for the stars. We can all get there', working class young people were being inculcated into the belief that educational success and failure was their responsibility alone. Frye (2019, p. 723) writes of 'the false sense of propulsion underlying dominant aspiration myths. As Cipollone & Stich (2017, p. 351) argue "building aspirations without building the capitals required renders the aspirations impotent". Reaching for the stars is not the same as embodying them. Since 2018, the already wide social class attainment gap has widened across all sectors of English education (Hutchinson et al., 2020). Despite the regular exhortations to strive for academic excellence, a majority of working-class young people in English schools still end up as educational losers with a strong sense that they only have themselves to blame (Reay, 2022b). If you are working class, alongside the opposition and resistance, there is inevitably a powerful internalisation of the judgments received from wider society, that to be working class is to be inferior, less cultured and less intelligent (Kuppens et al., 2018). Such judgments reinforce feelings of never being good enough, generating enduring dispositions of poor confidence, lack of entitlement and low self-esteem.

Over the last thirty years, despite the costs to their own self-worth, my research (Reay, 2017) has found that working class children and young people are increasingly likely to identify as powerfully agentic, buying heavily into process of individualization, self-actualisation and free choice. Meritocratic tropes are particularly evident in the young people's espousal of aspirational discourses of 'having it all' – so Hasim dreams of becoming a successful entrepreneur, owning houses across the globe and having a fleet of cars, including an Aston Martin, Shirin aims to be a leading archaeologist, while Sharleen intends to be a doctor. Highly agentic perspectives also permeate their attitudes to their learning and, in particular, their powerful sense of individual responsibility for learning (and in a majority of cases their failure to achieve educational success). Students told me 'It's down to the individual how well you do at school', 'you have to make yourself stand out compared to all the other people doing the same exams', 'if you want to do well you just have to work really hard. You can't blame the school or your teachers', and more disturbingly, 'You have to be the very best of the best'. We can see the processes of pedagogic authority, pedagogic action and pedagogic work that Bourdieu and Passeron mapped out so meticulously in *Reproduction* operating as a form of domination and control.

Across the globe working class young people are urged to do ever increasing amounts of work on themselves with the aim of 'becoming the sort of person who can succeed in an increasingly stratified and uncertain world (Robertson et al., 2017). These working-class young people are heavily invested in notions of the autonomous, self-reliant individual, primarily responsible for any future outcomes (Sumroy, 2022). Educational and career outcomes become centred on the actions and inactions of the individual students (Frye, 2019). But with strongly perceived agency came the self-attribution of blame in the many instances when they failed. Working class young people regularly said they were stupid, rubbish or no-good. In particular, working-class children, placed

in the lower 'ability' sets at school, talked of 'counting for nothing' and 'having no hope of a good life', frequently constructing themselves as failures.

Bourdieu & Passeron (1977, p. 83) argue that the disadvantage attached to social origin is primarily mediated through educational channelling and streaming. Contemporary English education has seen an increased focus on such processes both between schools, as types of schools proliferate (Hilton, 2018), and within schools with children as young as 4 and 5 are regularly placed in ability sets (National Education Union [NEU], 2017). What becomes evident is the damaging way in which the dispositions of 'cultural unworthiness' (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977, p. 42), the working classes bring with them into the school are, far too often, reinforced and sedimented by pedagogic action and the work of schooling. They are relegated to what Bourdieu & Passeron (1977, p. 41) call 'second-order teaching', internalizing through the inferiority and low status of this teaching their own inferiority and low status. Their narratives of self-blame and lack of worth highlight the powerful, compelling ways in which the mobilization of social mobility and the myth of meritocracy act to re-inscribe existing relations of power and domination by making the working classes responsible for educational outcomes they have very little power to influence. "The functioning and functions of the educational system as an agency of selection, elimination and concealment of elimination under selection" (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977, p. 154) are elided in the incessant focus on aspiration and the ability of individuals to achieve any goal as long as they strive hard enough. This is agency producing existing social structures through processes mapped out by Bourdieu and Passeron in *Reproduction*. It becomes evident that it is not agency that the working classes lack but power and resources.

Throughout working-class young people's quotes we see the symbolic violence, Bourdieu & Passeron (1977, p. 25) write so powerfully about, being channelled through meritocratic beliefs that sanctify the devaluation of the dominated and reinforce the privilege of the dominant. The misrecognition of educational advantage that meritocracy authorises, allows the economic, social and cultural capitals that define educational success to be read as inherent ability, while the lack of those capitals is misread as an inherent 'lack'. Bourdieu (2018, p. 33) states that the very definition of symbolic violence is the ability of the dominant to impose their own perception of themselves on others. I would argue that it also includes the ability to impose their view of the dominated on others, including the dominated themselves. As I have argued in earlier work (Reay, 2020, p. 410), we see in plain sight 'how damaging an educational system premised on meritocratic competition is for those who struggle, swallowed up in a remorseless system of hierarchical ranking and a competitive counting culture'.

This is a harsh, uncaring approach to inequalities. This research, and that of others in the field of class inequalities in education (Sayer, 2005), raise key issues around the moral dimensions of class inequalities and the cruel ways in which reproduction gets done, that Bourdieu & Passeron (1977; 1979) ignore. Young English people are being indoctrinated into the belief that they can transform their own lives if they are self-disciplined enough, obey all the rules, and strive long hours everyday. Self-responsibilisation (Peters, 2017), the shifting of responsibility from the state to the individual student, has taken the place of any attempts by our political elite to redress the very unequal distribution of capitals – economic, cultural and social between different social classes. The neo-liberal meritocratic sentiments underpinning the academies movement have left the blame for educational underachievement with neoliberalism's victims rather than its architects (Reay, 2020). The contemporary English economy is one where insecure contracts, low pay and anti-social hours are endemic. What was also concerning was the students' recognition and acceptance that the discipline and control exercised over them in school was good preparation for a future labour market that they readily acknowledged would be long hours of hard work, and a culture of worker obedience, regulation, and surveillance.

But habitus also plays as important a role in Bourdieu and Passeron's analysis in *Reproduction* as it does in many of Bourdieu's later works. It is key to reproductive processes. Bourdieu & Passeron (1977, p. 157) write of "the convictions by default or suspended sentences which the working classes inflict on themselves by eliminating themselves from the outset or by condemning themselves to eventual elimination". It was dispositions of lack of entitlement and being undeserving, both rooted in working class habitus, that the French working classes brought to their schooling in 1960s France. But *Reproduction* is not only about education, as the title of the English translation states, it is also about reproduction in society and culture. Those dispositions of 'cultural unworthiness' (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977) are still there in the English working classes fifty years on. It has been painful to see how undeserving the vast majority of the English working classes feel not just in relation to educational success but more widely in terms of political inclusion (Evans & Tilley, 2017). One consequence can be seen in the working-class response to much of the strongly redistributive 2019 Labour Party Manifesto. As one working class Northern voter quipped 'it is offering us too much'. There was widespread incredulity and a disbelief that they deserved the redistribution and additional rights and resources on offer. Partly, this is because the English working classes no longer have access to the symbols of strength and resistance traditionally associated with being working class (Atkinson, 2015). Their reserves of capital relative to the upper and middle classes have fallen in the field of education and beyond over the last decade of imposed austerity (Alston, 2018). Here Bourdieu and Passeron's insights about the self-exclusion of the working classes, and the enduring dispositions of lack of worth engrained in working class habitus, make just as much sense in the contemporary political sphere as they do in the educational field. I want to suggest we see the imprint of 'the chains', Robbins (2006) refers to, in working class responses to the political field, as in the field of education.

CONCLUSION

"Some concept of reproduction is necessary if we are to have any critical sociology of, for example, either education or tradition. It is characteristic of educational systems to claim that they are transmitting 'knowledge' or 'culture' in an absolute, universally derived sense, though it is obvious that different systems, at different times and in different countries, transmit radically different selective versions of both. Moreover it is clear, as Bourdieu and others have shown, that there are fundamental and necessary relations between this selective version and the existing dominant social relations" (Raymond Williams, 1981, p. 186).

At an historical juncture when educational, and wider social inequalities, are growing, it is crucial to develop better understandings of the ways in which our struggles and strivings for a fairer educational system, and a more level playing field for the working classes, may work to re-inscribe an unjust status quo. As Steph Lawler (2004, pp. 124-125) argues:

Bourdieu's work is important in reminding us that pessimism is not the same as determinism; that resistance takes many forms; and that, in any case, for many groups of people, change is very difficult to effect, no matter how much they resist. This is what it means to be dominated.

Through *Reproduction* we see the scale, depth and intractability of the problem of educational inequality. Despite the many scathing criticisms of Bourdieu's determinism, and the focus of his critics on resistance, little has happened over the last 50 years to ameliorate the problem. Will Atkinson (2021) found that the French school system at the beginning of the 21st century was remarkably similar in its fundamental structure to that posited by Bourdieu and Passeron in *Reproduction* 30 years earlier. Twenty years on, English education demonstrates a very similar pattern of reproduction, powerfully

influenced, not by aspiration, effort and ability, but by capital composition and the workings of symbolic violence in schooling. Currently, as the educational attainment gap between the different social classes widens, exacerbated by the Covid pandemic (Hutchinson et al., 2020), and social mobility, both in England and abroad begins to stagnate, we need to focus more than ever on the potentially damaging role played by the educational system in shaping individual destinies. And here again recognition of how actions can work to re-inscribe inequitable structures is crucial.

I began this article on a personal note and I would like to end on one. As an academic who views themselves as a lifelong political activist, fighting for the rights of the working classes in English society, I reject deterministic analyses. The working classes and their supporters are constantly pursuing social justice goals, engaged in action to transform society. We share an optimism of the will, if not of the intellect (Gramsci, 1996) But despite our campaigning and activism, just like that of my parents in the 1970s and 80s, and my grandparents in the 1920s and 30s (Reay, 2022a), our activism has not transformed England into a more equal society. 'The long labour of forging a united group' (Fowler, 2020, p. 459), capable of challenging unjust class relations and redressing class inequalities, is an unfinished project. We are still waiting in England for the internal contradictions generated by the decline of the State to lead to the scale of crisis that is capable of generating progressive social change (Fowler, 2020). And it is important to understand why, despite constantly changing social and economic circumstances, and an educational system that is very different to the educational system even twenty years ago, that change has not been forthcoming. In their co-authored book, Bourdieu & Boltanski (1975) wrote,

We seek to *lift the lid* which bears down on the heads of the poorest. Just as medicine has liberated us from infantile mortality [...] so our education ought to avoid the mutilation that the current social system inflicts from generation to generation on the underprivileged. (my italics)

Bourdieu and Passeron's *Reproduction* is a key text in understanding what is necessary in order to 'lift the lid', impressing on the reader the enormous structural barriers and power imbalances that need to be challenged and overcome.

Despite the trenchant criticisms (Butler, 1999; Lahire, 1998; Latour, 2005), Bourdieu and Passeron's *Reproduction* provides many insights into how and why inequalities continue to infuse and animate the educational system, regardless of the myriad so-called reforms to improve and 'level-up' the system. As David James (2019, p. 37) argues 'there is a need to acknowledge that people working in education may be unwitting (or perhaps, semi-witting) agents of inequality, whatever their motives, and despite what else their actions achieve'. And recent research on the English educational system provides many examples (Thompson et al., 2021; Kulz et al., 2022; Sumroy 2022; Abrahams, forthcoming) of 'unwitting agents of inequality'. Compounding this work of inequality are processes of exclusion emanating from upper and middle-class families and their practices of cultural re/production. Bourdieu and Passeron's concepts of pedagogic action, authority and agency together with symbolic violence, habitus and misrecognition provide us with the conceptual tools to better understand how practices, across class groups, simultaneously animate, reinforce and challenge structures. Far from presenting a deterministic view of education, Bourdieu and Passeron's *Reproduction* brings the work of structure to life. Their research reveals how individuals are constantly making and remaking the structures that limit (and in the case of the privileged enhance) their power and agency in everyday processes in which 'social structures and cognitive structures are recursively and structurally linked' (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992, p. 14). It also allows us to glimpse, albeit faintly, the challenges to those structures, and the extent to which they generate contradictions and crises. However, this is not to assert that *Reproduction* is the 'blue-print' for a comprehensive theory of inequality, that captures all of the dynamism of class relations, the myriad field effects

and power plays within the field of education. As Bourdieu himself admitted in a later interview (Bourdieu & Delsaut, 2002, p. 193):

My work is a series of maiden voyages. There is something misleading in texts which are finished, definitive or even “hyper finished,” so to speak, like *La Reproduction* for example (I am referring to the first part) where every effort has been made to eliminate any trace of hesitation or erasure, in a word, anything denoting a working copy.

But if we start with the premise that *Reproduction* should be viewed as ‘a working copy’ it becomes a very useful starting point along a path that includes the rest of Bourdieu’s remarkable scholarship.

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