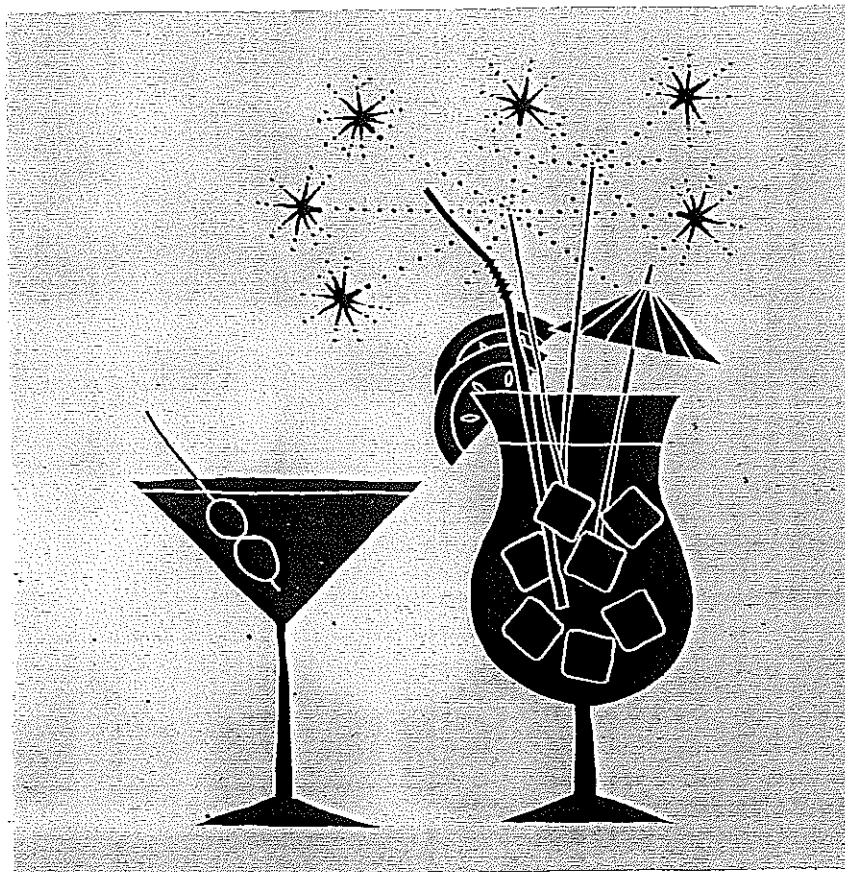


# A SENSE OF ONE'S PLACE

PIERRE BOURDIEU (1930–2002)



## IN CONTEXT

### FOCUS

#### Habitus

### KEY DATES

**1934** The essay "Body Techniques" by French sociologist and anthropologist Marcel Mauss lays the foundations for Pierre Bourdieu's re-elaboration of the concept of "habitus".

**1958** Max Weber suggests that "a specific style of life can be expected from those who wish to belong to the circle".

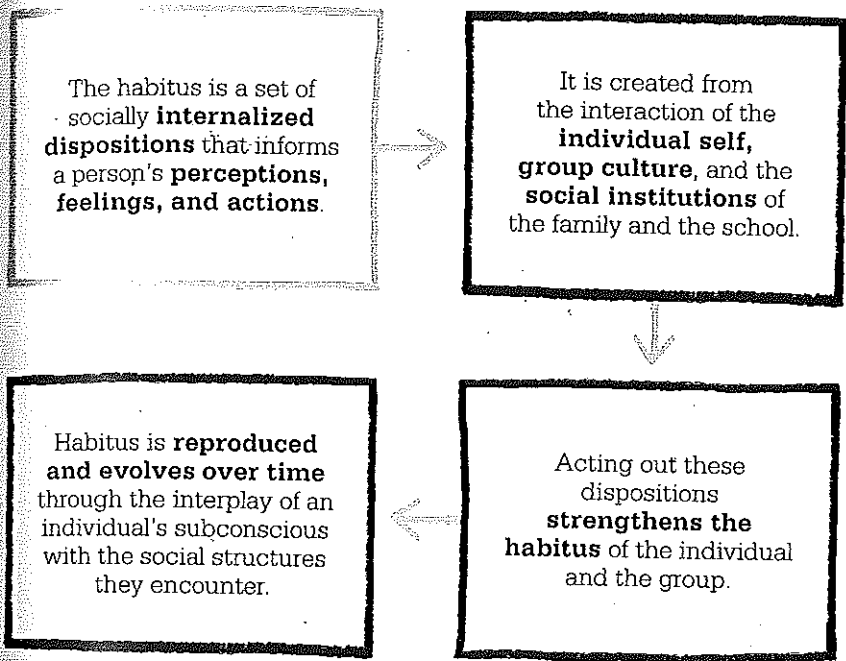
**1966** English historian E P Thompson says class is "a relationship that must always be embodied in real people and in a real context".

**2003** US cultural theorist Nancy Fraser says that capitalist society has two systems of subordination – the class structure and the status order – which interact.

**F**rom Marx to Durkheim and Weber to Parsons, sociologists have been keen to determine how the social-class system is reproduced, in the belief that it is structurally bound to economics, property ownership, and financial assets.

But in the 1970s Pierre Bourdieu claimed, in *Distinction*, that the issue was more complex: social class is not defined solely by economics, he said, "but by the class habitus which is normally associated with that position". This concept was first discussed by the 13th-century Italian theologian Thomas Aquinas, who claimed that the things people want or like, and

See also: Karl Marx 28-31 ■ Émile Durkheim 34-37 ■ Friedrich Engels 66-67 ■ Richard Sennett 84-87 ■ Norbert Elias 180-81 ■ Paul Willis 292-93



activities were all similar to one another. The French upper classes, he noted, enjoyed reading poetry, philosophy, and politics. They liked going to classic or avant-garde theatre, museums, and classical-music concerts; they enjoyed going camping and mountaineering.

Within the working classes, Bourdieu found that people liked reading novels and magazines, betting, visiting music halls and boutiques, and owning luxury cars. The choices were relatively limited and they were determined not by cost, but by taste. He realized that people who were members of a certain class, or "class fraction" (class subset), shared tastes because they shared dispositions, or "habitus". They had somehow come to like and dislike the same things. And this awareness of shared habitus gave them a distinct sense of place; they "fitted" into this or that class.

The construction of habitus is due neither to the individual nor the existing environment - it is created through the interplay of the subjective mind with the structures and institutions around him or »

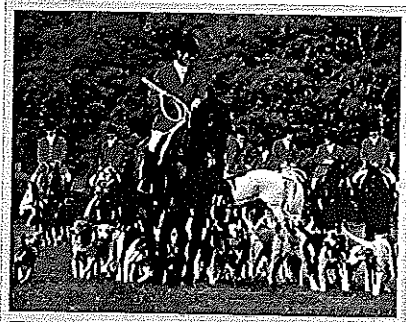
the way they act, is because they think of themselves as a certain kind of person: each of us has a particular inclination, or habitus.

Bourdieu, however, develops the idea significantly. He defines habitus as an embodied set of socially acquired dispositions that lead individuals to live their lives in ways that are similar to other

members of their social-class group. An individual from one class will "know" that something is "pretentious" or "gaudy", whereas a person from another class will see the same thing as "beautiful" or "stunning". He suggests that a child learns these things from their family, and then from their school and peers, who demonstrate to the growing child how to speak and act, and so on. In this way, he says, "the social order is progressively inscribed in people's minds".

**Class dispositions**

While researching class divisions in France in the 1960s, Bourdieu noticed that people of the same class exhibited similar cultural values. The things they knew and valued, the way they spoke, their choice of clothes and decoration of the body, and their views on art, leisure, and entertainment



**Fox-hunting is a leisure pursuit** that feels natural to some as a result of their habitus, or disposition. The same tendency makes other types of activity (such as karaoke) feel strange.



Habitus is society written into the body, into the biological individual.

**Pierre Bourdieu**





her. Individuals are born into a particular social-class group. Each is defined by a specific lifestyle, referred to by Bourdieu as the habitus of the group. Every social-class group has a group habitus that simultaneously defines, and differentiates it from, all the other group habitus in society.

The habitus of the group is also inscribed in the bodily dispositions and gestures of the individual. The social class of a person can be discerned from how they walk, talk, laugh, cry, and so on – from everything they do, think, and say. For the most part, because they are born and raised within a particular group habitus, individuals are generally unaware of the ways in which habitus both enables and restricts how they think, perceive, act, and interact with the world around them.

Habitus – as the embodiment of the dispositions of the wider group to which the individual belongs – provides people with a clear sense of the type of person they are and what it is that people like themselves should think and feel, as well as the manner in which they should behave.

Habitus gives individuals a unique “sense of one’s place”, because their internalized self perfectly matches the structure of their external world. But if they were to stray into the “fields” (institutions or structures) of a different class, they would feel like “a fish out of water”, wrong-footed at every turn.

### Forms of capital

Bourdieu maintains that the habitus of an individual is made up of different types and amounts of capital (economic, cultural, and social), which he redefined as “the set of actually usable resources and powers” that a person has.

Economic capital refers, quite simply, to monetary resources and property. A person’s cultural capital is their capacity to play “the culture game” – to recognize references in books, films, and theatre; to know how to act in given situations (such as apt manners and conversation at the dinner table); to know what to wear and how; and even who “to look down your nose at”. Because habitus defines a person within any situation as being of a certain class or class fraction, it is critical in delineating the social order.

Expressing a view about something, such as a work of art, provides another person with information that enables them to assess the speaker’s cultural capital and judge his or her social class.

Bourdieu says the habitus is often obvious through “judgments of classification”, which are pronounced about a thing, such as a painting, but act to classify the person speaking. Where one person describes a painting as “nice”, and another as “passé”, we learn little about the artwork, but much more about the person and their habitus. People use these judgements deliberately to distinguish themselves from their neighbours and establish their class.

In addition to economic and cultural capital, people may have social capital – human resources (friends and colleagues) gained through social networks. These relationships give a sense of mutual obligation and trust, and may offer access to power and influence.

This idea of social capital can be seen in the success of social networking websites such as Facebook and LinkedIn, which provide ways for individuals to increase their social capital. Bourdieu also saw scholastic



Scientific observation shows that cultural needs are the product of upbringing and education.

**Pierre Bourdieu**





capital (intellectual knowledge), linguistic capital (ease in the command of language, determining who has the authority to speak and be heard), and political capital (status in the political world) as playing a part in class.

### The class game

The class struggle, outlined so comprehensively by Marx, can be played out at an individual level using Bourdieu's terms. He says that an individual develops within relationships (the family and school), before entering various social arenas or "fields" (such as institutions and social groups), where people express and constantly reproduce their habitus. Whether or not people are successful in the fields they enter depends on the type of habitus they have and the capital it carries.

Every field has a set of rules that reflects the group habitus, to the extent that the rules seem "common sense" to them. People are recognized for their "symbolic capital" and its worth within the field. Their symbolic capital represents the total of all their other forms of capital, and is reflected as prestige, a reputation for competence, or social position.



Those who talk of equality of opportunity forget that social games... are not 'fair games'.

**Pierre Bourdieu**



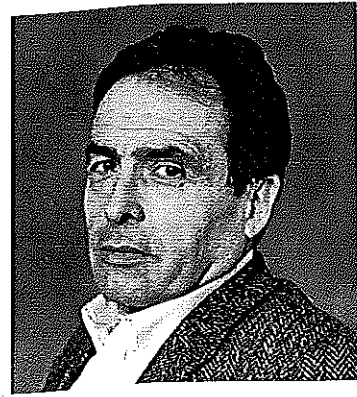
During their lifetimes, people put their various forms of capital to work. They also "strategize", figuring out how to compete with each other for increased power and capital. The particular forms that these strategies can take are governed by habitus, and yet most people are not consciously aware of the extent to which their actions and choices in life are determined by these acquired dispositions.

### The possibility of change

Because Bourdieu's idea of cultural capital rests so heavily on the constantly reproduced habitus, which is embedded in all of us, he seems quite pessimistic about the possibility of social mobility.

However, the habitus *is* open to change through different forces within the field. The interaction of institutions and individuals usually reinforces existing ideas, but it is possible for someone from a lower social class to gain cultural capital by, for instance, being sent to a "good" school. This might raise their economic capital – and their children, in turn, might be privately schooled and benefit from increased economic and cultural capital and a different habitus. So, for Bourdieu, all forms of capital are interrelated: people convert their economic capital into cultural and social capital in order to improve their life chances.

Bourdieu's habitus has had a major impact on sociological debate in the last few decades. More than any other idea, it captures the extent to which impersonal social structures and processes influence what are regarded as seemingly unique personal dispositions. In short, habitus brings together insights of a number of prominent thinkers in one compact and versatile concept. ■



**Pierre Bourdieu**

Born in 1930 in a rural village in southwest France, Pierre Bourdieu was the only son of a postman. A teacher recognized his potential and recommended he go to Paris to study. After graduating from the prestigious *École Normale Supérieure* with a degree in philosophy, he taught at the University of Algiers during the Algerian Liberation War (1956–62).

While in Algeria, he undertook ethnographic studies that resulted in his first book, *The Sociology of Algeria* (1958). On his return to France he became Director of Studies at the *École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales*, Paris, and began an acclaimed career in social studies. He believed research should translate into action, and was involved in many political protests against inequality and domination. Bourdieu died in 2002.

### Key works

1979 *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*

1980 *The Logic of Practice*

1991 *Language and Symbolic Power*