

# The Cultural Capital of Cultural and Social Capital: An Economy of Translations

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## Translate

1. to change from one place, position, or condition to another; to transfer; 2. to put into the words of another language; 3. to change into another medium or form.

Those of us in the field of education, in the United States and elsewhere, have drawn from the work of Pierre Bourdieu, James Coleman, and Gary Becker for some time. More recently, scholars of higher education in the United States have embraced the theories of cultural and social capital. Research on higher education in the United States repeatedly makes reference to cultural or social capital, especially with regard to students' academic preparation for college (Horvat et al., 2003; Ream, 2005; Roscigno and Ainsworth-Darnell, 1999); college access (Anderson, 2005; Karen, 2002; Kim and Schneider, 2005; McDonough, 1997; Perna and Titus, 2005; Persell et al., 1992; St. John, 2006; Tierney and Jun, 2001); choice of college major (Porter and Umbach, 2006; Simpson, 2001), college experience (Aries and Seider, 2005; Pascarella et al., 2004; Walpole, 2003); transfer rates (Wassmer et al., 2004); persistence (Deil-Amen and Rosenbaum, 2003; Longden, 2004; Paulsen and St. John, 2002; Valadez, 1993); and success (Gandara, 1999; Perna, 2004, 2005; Zweigenhaft, 1993). The uses of theories of economic, cultural, and social capital in much of this research do provide an explanation of the social maladies in the US educational system, particularly in the precollegiate settings (e.g., many students fail to succeed in higher education because of inadequate prior schooling and, thus, a lack of capital). Much of this research also offers us solutions (e.g., give more economic, social, or cultural capital to those students who were deprived of it). A number of these authors refer back to Coleman, Bourdieu, and Becker as if they were interchangeable and synonymous. In the US context, Bourdieu's work is conflated with that of James Coleman – indeed, both scholars are cited often in the same sentence, an issue we find to be emblematic of a particular mistranslation of Bourdieu.

We argue for a separate understanding of these authors, one which appreciates their strengths and weaknesses and unique contributions. Much of this research, to the extent that it uncritically assumes that access to higher education leads to individual or group mobility, adheres to a uniquely American understanding of capital

that is premised on theories of rational action and individual agency. In particular, we think that the work of James Coleman, often cited in the higher-education literature listed in this paragraph, but less so than Bourdieu, attempts to reconcile theories of agency with those of structure in his explanation of social capital (for an excellent critique of Coleman's methodological assumptions, see Portes, 1998). Given the importance of Coleman to this research and to our argument, we discuss his work in some length. Coleman and those that follow appear to justify ways of ensuring more access and equity to historically discriminated groups (see, e.g., Kim and Schneider, 2005; Perna and Titus, 2005). The logic of much of this research relying on theories of cultural and social capital goes something like this: Students from historically discriminated groups have been deprived of cultural capital, and as a result of this deprivation, they have been unable to achieve as have students who have such capital, despite the elimination of state-sanctioned barriers. Thus, to help them succeed in higher education, we should help them attain more cultural or social capital.

We will argue that this logic, for all its good intentions, fails to grasp adequately the theoretical, and thus very practical, implications of the notions of cultural and social capital as defined by Bourdieu. We argue that Coleman and those that follow his work err in ascribing greater agency to oppressed groups than is legitimate.

To the extent that these researchers draw from Bourdieu's work, they are governed by a heuristic: an elaboration of class structures. Bourdieu's theories of social and cultural capital have great appeal in the field of higher education because they provide ways of illustrating how access is constrained by forces of oppression. Capital involves oppression that functions in a covert and "natural" way which privileges those in the dominant group.

It is our premise in this chapter that the theories of cultural and social capital commonly used in the field of higher education derive from Coleman's and Bourdieu's work but that their theories are far from interchangeable. We argue that Bourdieu's theories have been poorly translated to fit a uniquely American perspective. In other words, the predominant uses of the idea of cultural capital in the United States convert Bourdieu's theory from one focusing on class formations to one focusing on individual interests, which is concerned with the investments individuals make of themselves in order to ensure their economic well-being. In essence, when scholars use Bourdieu's theories to make individualist arguments, they are essentially converting those theories from ones concerned with social structures to ones concerned with human capital. Human capital theories rely on notions of human agency (particularly economic agency), which Bourdieu's theories, for all their remarkable heuristics, obscure. We discuss the implications of both the (mis)translations and of the drawbacks that both Coleman's and Bourdieu's theories provide us in the field of higher education. A theory of human capital translated into theories of cultural and social capital may undermine the value of Bourdieu's original theories, which developed in a European context in which classes, not individuals, were the foci of concern. The problem with such a translation for us is less that the translation is a misappropriation, for misappropriations are, after all, not by definition bad and may even open up new avenues of thought and practice. Indeed, the original theory of

cultural capital has embedded within it certain problematic assumptions and over-determinations, and a misappropriation is necessary if we are to translate such a theory into a different context. However, we argue here that the translation of a theory of classes into one of individuals hides more than it tells, and does more than it wants, for it obscures the ways in which class structures get formed and re-formed in the United States, as well as how individuals, while not completely determined by such structures, are nevertheless constrained by them.

This chapter uses normative analysis, and as such it engages in critical argumentation which does not rely on empirical research for its logic. Critical argumentation may be derided as engaging simply in speculation, and to the extent that such analysis is driven by normative frameworks it is indeed speculative. Our argument is not attempting to establish the “proof,” if by that we are relying on a correspondence theory of truth; our argument is inviting readers to wonder whether it is possible that what we take for granted is *impossible*, that is, subject to be different. In short, we offer no pretense that our claims are empirical; they are theoretical and normative, motivated by a desire to push readers to think differently, which is the most practical thing we can offer them.

Specifically, our chapter attempts to account for the kinds of discourses underlying the uses of the theory of cultural and social capital in the United States. It will seek to uncover what gets promoted via theories of cultural and social capital. Given that in the United States, at least, theories of cultural and social capital are particularly concerned with issues of individual mobility, the theories have fallen under the “economics of education” umbrella, and while this is problematic, as we explain later, it does require us to attend primarily to the texts in such an area. However, contrary to most economic accounts of higher education, we do not rely upon traditional economic analytical tools. Instead, we take our cue from what has been called the “new economic criticism,” which draws from literary criticism and cultural studies (see Osteen and Woodmansee, 1999). This interdisciplinary approach, in simple terms, treats economic texts as narratives, powerful ones that shape greatly the reality they purport to describe.

Our major argument is that the uncritical use of Bourdieu presents several problems, one that is not particularly harmful but another that is troubling. The first problem is that the uncritical use of Bourdieu is really a mistranslation of his work, as we explain. Misappropriation is not inherently wrong and is in many cases, including this one, necessary. However, the second problem is that the US misappropriation actually masks what is good about Bourdieu’s theory, which highlights class structures and class struggles. To mistranslate him is to take his forms of capital as an individualistic idea, an idea of social mobility. This is harmful because it masks serious class struggles and structures and to obscure them in effect reinforces them.

Therefore, we discuss at length the theories of cultural and social capital as Bourdieu and Coleman elaborated them. We pay particular attention to Bourdieu’s sociology of education. We think an in-depth elaboration of Bourdieu’s work will make clear to the reader why we later critique the uses of social and cultural capital in higher education. Following, we summarize Coleman’s articulation of social capital, and we speculate whether it is in fact Coleman’s theory of social capital that actually

grounds the uses of the theory of cultural and social capital in the United States, not Bourdieu's. We think of this as "(Lost In) Translations," but it could almost be understood as a new language rather than a mistranslation. It is here where we argue that a US understanding is not of social class but is a theory of individual mobility.

In "(Re)Translations," or "Capital Culture," we critique this translation of social and cultural capital, arguing that, as we indicated above, it hides more than it tells and does more than it wants. We conclude with an argument that calls for more attention to the original purposes of Bourdieu's theories of cultural and social capital, but we also argue that these theories themselves suffer from a particular mistranslation themselves: they borrow too easily from the language of economics, undermining their democratic potential. In this chapter, therefore, we offer critiques of the original and translated theories of cultural and social capital in the hopes of engaging debates that will allow for a more fruitful elaboration of theories of marginalization. We end with a critique of Bourdieu's theory as being too structural and deterministic; a good misappropriation must make room for some form of agency. We must use Bourdieu's theory so that its value to highlight oppression is maintained, yet acknowledging the problematic effect of applying him too strictly.

## On Bourdieu's Capital

For the most part, Bourdieu's oeuvre is concerned with power relations, and particularly with how social hierarchies reproduce themselves without the conscious or intentional actions of individuals (Swartz, 1997). He sees domination in modern advanced societies as perpetuated less by state-sanctioned discrimination or individual acts of prejudice than by social or cultural distinctions which are assumed to be natural. According to David Swartz (1997), Bourdieu develops a political economy of practices (i.e., social actions) by extending the idea of economic interests into a theory of action that reconceptualizes the relations between the symbolic and materials elements of social life.

Bourdieu's concern with the interplay between social hierarchies and individual consciousness leads him to the familiar terrain of sociology, whose defining issue may be the distinction between structure and agency. The core of this agency versus structure debate, as Fine (1992) explains, is an attempt to understand intentional actions (agency) and the systemic limitation of those actions (structure). Bourdieu tries to transcend this dichotomy. His theory of structure/agency is dialectical, not dichotomous.

In short, Bourdieu encapsulates his theory of action in this way: [(habitus) (capital)] + field = practice (or action). The habitus sets up the possibilities of actions, and it does it only in particular "fields," which are the spaces in which action and structure meet in a dialectical fashion. The number of possibilities is a result of the amount of capital available to an individual or to the social group. We will say more about all these concepts, but for now it is worth repeating that Bourdieu attempts to conceptualize the agency/structure issue dialectically.

Bourdieu does not so much reject the theory of intentional action as much as reworks it to suit his theoretical commitments. He argues that all action (or “practice”) is *interested*, that is, “oriented” toward maximizing profit, material or symbolic. This notion of *interest* in maximizing profits differs from that of intentional or calculated action assumed by rational-choice theorists (e.g., Becker, 1993; Coleman, 1988), but action is not simply a mechanical response to an external environment either, as structuralists imply (e.g., Althusser and Balibar, 1998). Instead, he sees action as “patterned” or “dispositional,” which is to say that it results from a tacit, pre-reflective level of awareness that occurs over time (Swartz, 1997). To explain this he offers the concepts of “cultural capital,” “social capital,” “habitus,” and “field.”

Before elaborating on these key concepts of Bourdieu’s theories that have played a part in important research on higher education, particularly in the United States, we should stress that Bourdieu’s theories of capital are parts of his general theory of symbolic power, which is the power to legitimate what are essentially arbitrary distinctions in fields characterized by social hierarchies. The creation and legitimation of distinctions are functions of power, a power that legitimates itself by legitimating the distinctions it creates (Bourdieu, 1990). Distinctions made within the field of higher education carry particular force: the attribution of status given by education’s degrees and certifications not only classify but ensure the assignment of individuals into hierarchically ordered social classes (Bourdieu, 1984). Thus, institutions of higher education exercise a form of symbolic domination that reinforces material domination, which often is accomplished by varying levels of educational and professional opportunities and economic wealth – at least in the United States and in other Western nations.

Bourdieu’s theories of capital are premised, as we indicated, on a number of other theoretical presumptions, and so it is worth discussing these in more detail. We should note that others have a different view of the concepts underlying Bourdieu’s work (e.g., Swartz, 1997), but we conceptualize his work by first focusing on what Bourdieu believed by “capital”; second, we will discuss his notion of the “habitus”; third, we discuss his concept of “fields”; and last, we end with his sociology of education.

### *Forms of Capital*

Capital, for Bourdieu, as is the case for most political economists (such as Marx) and econometricians (such as Gary Becker), is accumulated labor (in its material or incorporated/embodyed forms) which, when appropriated on a private basis by individuals or groups, enables them to appropriate social power. The logic and organization of the distribution of different types of capital, at a given moment, represents the immanent structure of society, thus establishing the possibilities and constraints which govern individuals’ successes (Bourdieu, 1986). However, not all of these forms of capital are economic in the ways economists think of them.

Bourdieu sees three interrelated but distinct forms of capital: economic capital, social capital, and cultural capital. We discuss each in turn.

Bourdieu understands the power of economic capital (i.e., wealth). For him, the group with economic capital constitutes the dominant class. Yet, Bourdieu extends the notion of capital beyond its economist constraints, thus clearly differentiating himself from traditional Marxists. Indeed, Bourdieu finds problematic those who function under what he calls “economism,” which in education is the privileging of the relationship between rates of educational investment and economic investments, thus only accounting for monetary investments and profits or those easily convertible into that (e.g., tuition, financial aid, etc.). Individuals of this mold, for Bourdieu, fail to account for the variations of social and cultural investments within classes (Bourdieu, 1986).

Thus, Bourdieu also sees two other forms of capital, and social classes are to be defined primarily in relation to the amount and number of all forms of capital. So while economic capital appears to be important for him, he also maintains there are other forms of capital that have to be considered in any analysis of socially stratified societies. For example, Bourdieu sees the power to distinguish, that is, the power to create distinction, as instantiating a kind of cultural capital because distinctions yield a profit and ratify stratification. He does not mean “profit” in a strictly economic sense, but in the ability to control what is legitimate (or attractive, tasteful, distinctive, etc.) in order to set oneself apart from, and thus above, others.

Cultural capital involves a wide variety of resources, such as verbal competence, cultural awareness, aesthetic preferences, knowledge about school, and educational credentials (Swartz, 1997). These cultural products function as forms of capital because they yield a profit in distinction, proportionate to the rarity of the means required to appropriate them (Bourdieu, 1984). Bourdieu argues that cultural capital can exist in three forms: (1) in the embodied state, that is, in the form of long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body, or, in short, what individuals and groups gain from the habitus; (2) in the objectified state, that is, in the form of cultural goods (e.g., books, instruments, machines); and (3) in the institutionalized state, or, in the form of objectification which confers entirely original properties on the cultural capital which it presumes to guarantee, such as academic qualifications (Bourdieu, 1986).

Bourdieu’s idea of cultural and social capital have to be distinguished from, say, Becker’s (1993) idea of human capital or Coleman’s idea of social capital because Bourdieu focuses on class-based formation in socially stratified societies, while the latter focus on individual mobility in the labor market. And unlike the selfishly motivated, upwardly mobile individual premised by human-capital theories, Bourdieu sees cultural capital as becoming more and more a new basis of social domination, particularly as education becomes more and more important for economic and professional success. Just as economic capital cannot function as capital until it is linked to an economic apparatus, so cultural capital cannot be constituted as capital until it is inserted into the fields which must “produce the producers” through inculcation, such as the school and the family (Bourdieu, 1977a). It is the workings of this inculcation, we think, that forms the major part of Bourdieu’s oeuvre. Bourdieu’s cultural capital is also distinct from his concept of social capital and Coleman’s social capital, which we discuss later.

Bourdieu also acknowledges social capital, which we think, is really at the root of the problematic translations of Bourdieu's theories into the US context. Social capital is what comes from being in possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance, which provide individual members with the backing of the collectively owned capital (Bourdieu, 1986). Social capital is, in essence, an "advance," an acceptance that only the group's beliefs and values can grant the best symbolic and material benefits the group can offer. While not irreducible to economic and cultural capital, it is related to these other two because to receive profit from social capital presupposes a minimum level of homogeneity with members of the group, and such homogeneity is best assured by economic and cultural capital. Similarly, the appropriate social networks expose one to the most valued cultural capital and are best converted into economic capital. Social capital is, as Bourdieu theorizes, a product of our endless effort at institutionalization, which is necessary if we are to produce and reproduce lasting, useful relationships that can secure material or symbolic profit. We think social capital has such appeal in the United States because social capital is not reducible to economic capital. In other words, the United States collectively holds a belief that even if one is not born wealthy, one can still somehow be successful if one simply has the right connections (see Coleman, 1988); Bourdieu's conception of social capital would support this view, at least in theory.

Bourdieu understood the convertibility of each capital into the others. This convertibility is the basis for strategies aimed at ensuring the reproduction of capital by the least-costly means in terms of the labor required and of losses inherent in the conversion itself. The risk of conversion is riskier for cultural capital than the others because its transmission is concealed, and this concealment is a crucial part of why culture can become capital (i.e., cultural capital functions best when it conceals its role in social stratification). To the extent that the conversion of cultural capital (e.g., educational qualifications) into economic capital disposes the dominant group, struggles over conversion will take place. And so it goes that as the official transmission of capital is prevented or hindered, according to Bourdieu, the more likely the effects of concealed circulation of cultural capital is determinant in the reproduction of social stratification (Bourdieu, 1986).

Indeed, the greater the extent to which the task of reproducing the mechanism of social domination is taken over by objective mechanisms, such as schools – as opposed to, say, brute force – the better they serve the interests of the dominant class without any conscious effort on the latter's part, the more indirect and impersonal become the strategies oriented toward reproduction. In other words, when social distinctions – which are the basis for social domination – are determined by institutionalized mechanisms, such as the market, the educational system, or the judicial system, where they have a permanence and opacity, they lie beyond individual consciousness (Bourdieu, 1990). Therefore, once these objective mechanisms ensuring social stratification are in place, the dominant class needs only to sit back and let the system take its course and themselves become less aware of the discriminating system. In societies in which more overt oppression meets with strong disapproval (as in the United States), the mechanism for reproducing cultural capital become important, and, actually, more efficient (Bourdieu, 1977a; 1990). Relations of domination are no longer dependent on individuals but on objective mechanisms

which guarantee, legitimize, and allocate the distinctions, which in turn establish the social hierarchies crucial for material domination (Bourdieu, 1990). Cultural and symbolic distinctions are thus determined by socioeconomic structures, but they are supported by mechanisms which obscure that determination (such as colleges or universities). Bourdieu's theories of capital, therefore, are really theories of domination. Yet, this still begs the question of how it can happen. Why, according to Bourdieu's theory, do people allow themselves to be dominated in this way? This is where the theory of the habitus functions.

### *The Habitus*

The habitus for Bourdieu, in short, proffers to explain how individuals act to reinforce social structures and how social structures influence actions. Bourdieu (1990) intends the habitus to be a concept used to understand classes, not individuals, for, he says, in a "society divided into classes, all the products of a given agent, by an essential overdetermination, speak inseparably and simultaneously of his class, or more precisely, his position and trajectory (rising or falling) within the social structure" (p. 79). Bourdieu (1984) has offered very little in the way of an unambiguous definition of habitus but says that

[t]he habitus is not only a structuring structure, which organizes practices and the perception of practices, but also a structured structure: the principle of division into logical classes which organizes the perception of the social world is itself the product of internalization of the division into social classes. Each class condition is defined, simultaneously, by its intrinsic properties and by the relational properties which it derives from its position in the system of class conditions, which also is a system of differences, differential positions, i.e., by everything which distinguishes it from what it is not and especially from everything it is opposed to; social identity is defined and asserted through difference. (pp. 170–172)

The habitus, if we can get around this convoluted language, appears to be the embodied form of dispositions which are set up by the social structure and in turn reinforce the social structure. It allows individuals to apprehend conditions and practices in accordance with principles and processes of differentiation that further social stratification but that are perceived by individuals as natural. In other words, social structures are misrecognized by individuals as natural. The habitus, then, is a set of embodied dispositions reflecting an entire history of a group and acquired through formative experiences in childhood (Holton, 1997; Nash, 1999), so that over time it becomes

an ethos, a set of flexible but enduring mental structures and bodily schemas that organize, orient, and direct comportment in private and public space. ... [The] habitus generates regular and immediate responses to a wide variety of situations without recourse to strategic calculation, conscious choice, or the methodical application of formal rules. (Topper, 2001, p. 38)

The habitus, however, can function to dominate individuals by reinforcing class distinctions, and, therefore, class structures. (We will question whether this notion negates human agency later in this chapter.)

More specifically, the structures which constitute the material conditions characteristic of classes produce habitus, which are systems of durable, transposable dispositions (thus being structured structures) predisposed to function as principles for generating and structuring practices and representations (thus also being structuring structures). Because the habitus mediates structures which generate themselves and other structures, it is both “regulated” (by preexisting structures) and “regular” (because it generates structures) without being simply the product of obedience to rules or of the orchestrating actions of a conductor (Bourdieu, 1977a). If the dispositions forming the habitus appear to anticipate behavior, it is only because it is determined by past structures that are still in effect. The habitus generates and constrains thoughts, perceptions, and actions consistent with the objective conditions that formed the basis for it in the first place. And, therefore, because the habitus is determined by objective conditions that engender only those aspirations and practices objectively compatible with those conditions, the most “improbable” practices (because they do not match their conditions) are excluded as unthinkable (or unnatural, or inevitable) and thus refused (Bourdieu, 1977a). The world which individuals inhabit is a world of already realized ends (Bourdieu, 1990).

But what actually forms a “class?” Bourdieu argues that classes are determined by homogeneous conditions of existence which enables practices to be objectively “harmonized.” In other words, members of a class share the same internalized objective structures which give them the same objective meanings necessary for mediating those structures, thus transcending subjective intentions (Bourdieu, 1977a). The habitus is the internalized class norms which regulate individual and collective practice (Garnham, 1986). The homogeneity of habitus enables the products of collective history to be reproduced in the form of shared dispositions. The members of the class need not have shared the experiences, but they must face the same objective conditions (e.g., poverty, poor public schooling, etc.), which harmonize the practices of the same class more than the members know or even wish. Thus, for Bourdieu, a class cannot be understood in terms of statistical patterns, but only in terms of the class habitus (Bourdieu, 1977a), which means also that the social scientist, to understand the habitus, must relate the social conditions in which the habitus was generated to the social conditions in which it is being implemented (Bourdieu, 1990).

If regularly observed practices seem to correlate with subjective aspirations (such as low aspirations to college by racial minorities), this is not because individuals consciously adjust their aspirations to their chances of success. It is because the aspirations are inscribed in objective conditions, which generate dispositions compatible with those conditions (Bourdieu, 1990). In other words, aspirations are not the results of psychological states, but of sociological conditions. As we see it, the conclusion of Bourdieu is that giving better schooling to historically subordinate groups (or access to college, as we will argue later) will always be inadequate for altering objective conditions leading to social hierarchies, for it is the habitus that must be the focus of attention, and it is there, apparently, where any change can take place. We will have occasion to question some of the presumptions of the habitus later in this chapter, particularly its negation of agency, but the point here is that the

analysis of class must account for two things: The conditions of its existence and the conditions of its practice. For the former attention must be given to the dispositions inculcated by the family, the community, and early schooling (primarily); for the latter one must look to the fields in which the habitus seeks to practice to ensure its reproduction, a point we turn to next.

### *Fields of Practice*

“Fields” for Bourdieu are not to be understood literally in spatial terms (e.g., education is a field under Bourdieu’s logic). They are mutually supporting combinations of intellectual discourses and social institutions, which have no reference to realities beyond themselves but that function to legitimate social structures, which also have no absolute meaning beyond themselves (Robbins, 1993). In other words, fields are structured arenas of practice and conflict, the “spaces” in which the interplays of habitus and structures are enacted, but which also maintain relative autonomy from each other (Swartz, 1997). This interplay is not necessarily a smooth process, as there can be tensions between the legitimate ways of acting or thinking defined by a field and the individual’s habitus-specific predispositions to think or act otherwise.

To the extent that there is near agreement between habitus and field, we have “doxa”; to the extent any previous disagreements have been negotiated, we have “orthodoxy”; and to the extent that there is little agreement between habitus and field, we have “heterodoxy.” Bourdieu offered little in the way of explaining orthodoxy or heterodoxy, as it seems he was concerned primarily with doxa, which involves immediate adherence in practice between the habitus and the field to which it is directed, constituting the preverbal, taken-for-granted views of the world, which are determined by social conditions that appear natural, making things appear sensible. Doxa is “in this way that because agents never know completely what they are doing that what they do has more sense than they know” (Bourdieu, 1990, pp. 68–69).

A field is a structured environment of social positions and also a structure of power relations. The relations between individuals, groups, and institutions determine, at any given time, the structure of the field – the powerful ones are those with their particular social and cultural capital valorized in the field (Topper, 2001) That is, the power of individuals, groups, and institutions within fields is largely (but not completely) determined by the cultural and social capital they own. Cultural capital and social capital, as we indicated, are the effects of the arbitrary distinctions which maintain group coherence and networks and that legitimate social domination. In other words, distinctions are enacted in particular fields that mark and reinforce group relations by establishing differences. Fields (and their subfields) are governed by specific laws of practice that determine both the conditions of entry into the field (e.g., economic capital, professional degrees, social connections) and the specific relations of force within it (e.g., who is authorized to speak and how) (Topper, 2001). Because of these specific laws applying to particular fields, they are

relatively autonomous from each other, in the sense that distinctions valuable in one field or subfield (e.g., the Ph.D. in academe) are not necessarily valuable in another (e.g., the Ph.D. in many other professions). For example, the privilege given to theory over practice in higher education may not be easily translated into a similar privilege in the nonacademic workplace, which, indeed, may privilege the inverse, that is, practice over theory. Power works by establishing difference and binaries that are set up in opposition to each other (e.g., theory/practice, micro/macro, education/training, and researcher/practitioner). Such dichotomies mislead and become more real than the processes they aim to represent (Grenfell, 1996).

Fields are environments of inter-field and intra-field conflicts. The distinctions that will matter are contested, especially if the power relations within them are unstable, that is, where doxa has not taken hold. In cases in which the conflict between fields cannot be resolved easily, there are attempts to adapt the distinctions that govern other fields, and if this stabilizes the conflict, then orthodoxy takes hold. But the point here is that to discuss distinctions that apply to given fields (e.g., educational distinctions), without accounting for the struggles within and between fields, miss altogether the temporality of particular orderings, as power relations within and between fields do shift. These struggles, we must stress, reflect the mechanisms of power at work. To put any position in a distinction above another is to gain control over the power to do that. And one must understand power for that very fact, rather than attempt to explain a distinction as if it did not have meaning beyond itself (e.g., the distinction associated with parental education as a basis for deciding who gets into college is often treated without attention to how this distinction is part of the power struggle). The power to distinguish is what is at stake in fields, but this power is obscured by the embodiment of the distinctions themselves; the distinctions appear natural, obvious, and inevitable. Individual and group identities shape themselves according to these distinctions (via the habitus). Thus, the important point here is that distinctions cannot be assumed to relate to things in themselves but to the effects and conditions of power and struggle.

Our discussion of social and cultural capital, determined and reinforced by the habitus, and enacted and “cashed in” fields of practice now allows us to move into the last point we want to address in this part of our chapter: Bourdieu’s sociology of education. Bourdieu aligned himself with those who argue that the school is an instrument of social reproduction, not of individual mobility, as we tend to assume in the United States.

### ***Bourdieu’s Sociology of Education***

For Bourdieu, the educational institution, perhaps as much as the family, produces habitus by reproducing class distinctions (Nash, 1999). The educational institution functions as a field where competencies are constituted and given positive or negative sanctions, reinforcing what is acceptable and discouraging what is not. It inculcates dispositions and reproduces class structures. Educational systems, then, much

like market systems, seek to produce and reproduce the institutional conditions required for their inculcating function and for reproducing the cultural arbitrariness necessary for social reproduction (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977). As a system of reproduction, the educational system cannot easily serve egalitarian functions, something which the scholars of higher education often fail to grasp when they introduce Bourdieu's theories in their analysis of marginalization (see Perna and Titus, 2005). Such a system directs itself only to students already equipped with the capital that the system presupposes and legitimates without asking for it explicitly or methodically transmitting it (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977). The success of the educational system, therefore, is not related to how many students it credentials – for those students are essentially and crudely taught what they already are predisposed to know – but to how well it sorts out students, since it must make it seem that most students fail because of their innate abilities or because of social conditions beyond the educational system's control.

Indeed, under a logic of social reproduction such as this, the extent to which the educational system can be said to be failing any students, it is only when those students who they were presupposed to serve from the outset and for which the system was institutionalized in the first place fail that the system truly fails. An example might help here: The logic of social reproduction would deem an institution such as Harvard University to “fail” only if wealthy, elite students are not being served (i.e., not admitted, retained, etc). Harvard cannot be said to be failing if, say, low-income students do not succeed, since those students are not the presupposed subjects of such an institution. Failure comes only when the social reproduction fails, and success is when social reproduction appears natural. The full effectiveness of the educational system, then, is only relative to the extent to which it addresses itself to individuals who have been previously granted a certain familiarity with the culture inculcated by the educational system (as a result of their social capital) and which was likely also attained via family upbringing and preschool experiences (Bourdieu, 1977b).

At the risk of redundancy, the education system is most effective when its distribution of cultural capital closely matches the hierarchy of class relations, and thus when its pedagogic practices match those of the dominant culture and its mode of instruction is most aligned with families in the dominant classes. An institution of higher education would provide the dominant class with a “theodicy of its own privilege,” and not just because of the ideologies it inculcates (e.g., “hard work,” “merit,” and “just deserts,” etc.) but because it masks the relationship between the credentials obtained and the inherited or attained cultural capital of the students it admits (Bourdieu, 1990). We think scholars of higher education concerned with egalitarian goals and who espouse cultural or social capital as the basis for their politics have likely focused on the “attained” possibility of cultural capital – i.e., cultural capital can be attained via social capital – but, to the extent they fail to address the role of colleges and universities in a system of social reproduction, they undermine the value of the theories they use. They undermine the heuristic of cultural capital, which is part of a system of justifying social hierarchies, and thus giving cultural capital to students is only to ensure the repro-

duction of hierarchies; and they undermine the heuristic of social capital, which is coherent only by first acknowledging the hierarchy, and thus advocating social networks is only to grant that those networks are successful because of their position in a hierarchy.

To explain how and why institutions of higher education can play their role in social reproduction so effectively we must look to how they exert power, namely through the creation and legitimation of academic distinctions or classifications. Scholastic classifications are to cultural capital what money is to economic capital. By standardizing its classifications (e.g., grades, awards, degrees, etc.), institutions of higher education standardize their currency, and thus any person can take the place of another within the same classification. This standardization allows the institutions to minimize the obstacles to their circulation of cultural capital, for they relegate everyone who holds what they offer (and those who do not) to a unified set of standards, giving them a single market for their cultural capital and guaranteeing that this capital does not need constantly to be proved (e.g., an Ivy League MBA is a lifetime credential that is broadly well known) (see Bourdieu, 1977a).

The best-hidden effect of a system of higher education, then, is the power to establish its distinctions as cultural capital. For, as Bourdieu (1984) states,

[t]he official differences produced by academic classifications tend to produce (or reinforce) real differences by inducing in the classified individuals a collectively recognized and supported belief in the differences, thus producing behaviors that are intended to bring real being into line with official being. (p. 25)

The production of academic distinctions, particularly because these distinctions attribute status, then, assigns individuals to hierarchically ordered classes. Such distinctions are more like patents of nobility than titles to property (Bourdieu, 1984), as strictly technical definitions make of them, especially if one argues simply for the admission of low-income students but otherwise fails to question the system of exclusions at stake. The creation of groups is always a demarcation and reorganization of individuals: there will be those *in* the class and those *out* of it.

Among other questions, this discussion should raise important ones:

- Can institutions of higher education ever serve altruistic goals?
- Can they end marginalization?
- Can researchers be advocates of such things?

We think so, but a close reading of Bourdieu would suggest otherwise. Bourdieu (1984) argues that academics, for example, to the extent they are a “dominated fraction” of the dominant classes, might have a “structural homology” with other economically and culturally dominated groups, but they too have an interest in distinction and in all other values that are recognized as highest and different from others. Thus, academics may find affinity with the dominated groups, and they may believe themselves to be working for the latter’s interests, but as *academics* they also have an interest in maintaining a structural dominance over those groups by distinguishing themselves from them. Note that for Bourdieu, neither “structural” nor “interest”

implies intentional action; academics too are subject to a habitus. Indeed, nothing in this entire discussion implies that any of this domination results from conscious behaviors; they are dispositions determined by objective conditions.

Bourdieu, it appears to us, would be leery of the liberal-humanist view of education so common in US educational discourse, which presumes that schools as gateways to the professions – particularly institutions of higher education – function for individual mobility. Those subscribing to this mobility view of higher education might focus on the part of Bourdieu's theory that explains that classes rich in cultural and social capital invest in their children's education, and this might also imply that giving more of such capital to the children from other classes would reap similar benefits for them (this seems to us Coleman's (1988) view). But such a logic should also grasp the class struggle in which Bourdieu situated his theory of capital, such that, parents with cultural capital not only invest in their children's education, but at the same time they would also seek to maintain and increase the specific rarity of such capital in order to maintain their relative distance from other classes (Bourdieu, 1977b). Oakes research on de-tracking schools demonstrated this in the US context (Oakes and Wells, 1998; Oakes et al., 2000). Those most resistant to de-tracking schools were those parents of students in the top track and their teachers. Even when the curriculum given to these students would not be diminished and all students would be given the more rigorous curriculum, they resisted the loss of their students' privileged position.

Efforts to equalize higher-educational opportunities for individuals from the different social classes, even if resulting in an empirically ascertained change in these classes, does not by itself constitute a sign of "democratization" (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977). In other words, if the social system is premised on the creation of hierarchies, which are maintained by institutions which legitimate those hierarchies via cultural capital, then even making more individuals "successful" does not mean that such a system is democratic and egalitarian. Institutions of higher education must be situated in a larger system of class relations, according to Bourdieu, which recognizes that the relative autonomy of institutions of higher education from other social institutions (e.g., the state) comes with their dependence on those class relations. Educational institutions thus cannot be analyzed separately from legal systems, market systems, and so on, systems which too further and legitimate class relations though differently. Indeed, what makes the educational system so effective in a larger system of social reproduction is its success in hiding its role in class relations, a role with a dual function: that of inculcating the dispositions required of those relations, and that of producing the producers of the relations, that is, for example, the professionals, the lawyers, and especially the professors (via credentials, degrees, etc.). In other words, according to Bourdieu and Passeron (1977), "the most hidden and most specific function of the educational system consists in hiding its objective function, that is, masking the objective truth of its relationship to the structure of class relations" (p. 208).

Cultural and social capital is a product, therefore, of a struggle to identify and keep up with the group immediately above and to distinguish oneself from the group below (Bourdieu, 1990). The attempts by some individuals to help subordinated

groups overcome the effects of marginalization, then, for all their good intentions normally aim not to abolish scholastic classifications, or the authority of educational institutions to create them, but to modify individual positions within the social hierarchy. This by default implies a tacit agreement with the classifications that guarantee the hierarchy (Bourdieu, 1990). The program does not advocate overturning the system, but moving more people up the hierarchy. Behind the empirically verifiable relationship between cultural and social capital and a particular type of knowledge or practice, there are relationships between groups with distinct and even antagonistic relations to such capital, knowledge, and practice (Bourdieu, 1984), and it is the task of any sociologist of education to make these relations explicit.

In summary, Bourdieu's theory is one of class-based social reproduction, not emancipation or individual mobility. While Bourdieu's theory has some weaknesses, which we discuss later, it is not a theory of individual mobility and research that discusses social capital as individual mobility probably originates in a uniquely American understanding of the term somewhat originating in the work of James Coleman. Given the importance of this line of thought, we summarize important aspects of it here and critique some of its assumptions.

### **Coleman's Social Capital: Lost in Translation**

In the United States, the uses of the theory of cultural and social capital in precollegiate settings predate its use in postsecondary research. In their meta-analysis of the use of the concept of social capital in K–12 research, Dika and Singh (2002) conclude that much of the K–12 literature bases its theoretical foundations on Coleman's concept of social capital rather than Bourdieu's concepts of capital, even though the latter is often cited and supposedly frames the bulk of the discussion on these issues. The same might be said of the research in higher education, where social capital is made central to the analysis of marginalization (e.g., Perna and Titus, 2005; Kim and Schneider, 2005).

Coleman (1988) seeks to offer an understanding of how theories of human capital, which he deems to emphasize notions of agency, and social capital, which he offers as a substitute for a notion of structure, can be reconciled to (1) transcend the dichotomy between agency and structure, and (2) present an adequate theory of why high school students drop out of school and what might be solutions to this problem. In this work, Coleman does not address cultural capital; he does not even cite Bourdieu in his work. Coleman argues that social capital, entailing a series of networks involving family, community, and schools, does not inhere in individuals (as does human capital), but in the structure of relations between actors and among actors. Human capital, by contrast, is created by changes in persons that bring about skills that make them act in new ways.

For Coleman (1988), the point of social capital is to create human capital and to stabilize cohesive communities. Social capital under Coleman is a theory of individual and social mobility. Coleman elevates the cohesive family and community

where members help one another succeed together. The families with rich social capital wisely convert it into human and cultural capital in the form of educational opportunities for their children. Assuming a fully informed rational actor, Coleman looks favorably on parents who make these efforts for their children; therefore, by extension, parents who lack the social networks to help their children can be blamed for failing to provide that assistance. Coleman relies on a deficit theory of families with less social capital when he argues that the “most prominent element of structural deficiency in modern families is the single-parent family” (p. S111). To be fair, he understood social capital as entailing more than the family, but his conclusions essentially place primary responsibility for acquiring social capital and for student performance on parents as the conveyors of social capital to their children. Schools convey less influence and therefore bear less responsibility. For example, one major conclusion of the Coleman Report (Coleman, 1966) was that additional resources would not improve the performance of children in predominantly African-American schools because their problems were characteristics of students’ families, rather than of schools, which strongly influenced student achievement. Daniel Patrick Moynihan (1965) took this further in his argument that the major problem of the African-American community was the decline in the two-parent family. Moynihan’s role as a US Senator took this argument to the mainstream.

Coleman’s logic has serious moral implications, but it is premised on a uniquely American understanding of agency and individualism. Indeed, a benign extension of Coleman’s deficit approach would suggest that colleges should be responsible for ameliorating the differences in academic success; thus, educational institutions might intervene on behalf of students in order to make up for the parents’ deficit (Coleman, 1988; Portes, 1998). With notable exceptions such as Puente and Indiana’s Twenty-First Century Scholars Programs, a number of postsecondary encouragement or TRIO-type programs appear to follow this logic. Rather than empower parents with the cultural and social capital necessary to support their children (which would also be an intervention with moral implications), these programs substitute experts who give the students the capital their parents failed to provide them (see also Berger, 2000; Kim and Schneider, 2005; Perna and Titus, 2005; Ream, 2005). While not saying that these programs make a conscious choice to sideline parents, they do provide trips to cultural events, college campuses, and other social or cultural capital where these students are perceived to be deficient. There is an implicit message to participating students that they are deficient in these experiences and therefore are not college-ready without repair work. The focus appears to be on remediating the students rather than questioning the educational institutions that prepared them. We appreciate that our reading of Coleman is speculative, but we find that a logical extension of his concept, and those who argue that social networks can be secured by educational institutions, would indeed require intervention into the sovereignty of the family, which does not come without obvious moral and political consequences. Rather than questioning a system that requires such intervention while still espousing a discourse of individual just desert, a logic like Coleman’s would have educational institutions replace parents in providing the social capital that students need to acquire academic credentials.

## Contrasting Translations: Bourdieu and Coleman

Juxtaposing a reading of Bourdieu with Coleman exposes a contradiction that many fail to tease out (see Table 1 for a summary of their differences). Coleman uses social capital as a proxy for structural conditions, which can be converted into human

**Table 1** Comparison between Bourdieu and Coleman in understanding social and cultural capital

	Bourdieu	Coleman
Purpose/focus	Explain class structure and hierarchy	Explain differences in individual attainment
Theory	Theory of social reproduction and oppression	Theory of individual social mobility in social communities
Forms of capital	Cultural, social, human/ economic capital	Social and human capital
How capital functions	(habitus) (capital) + field = practice	Social and human capital are exchangeable. Social capital is shared within a network that creates community and rewards those individuals and families who participate in the community. Parents with more capital give more to their children. Anyone can acquire more and better social capital
How capital is understood	Social and cultural capitals create and sustain distinctions between groups. Social capital is a force of oppression	Social capital is good because it creates cohesive stable communities and facilitates opportunity for individuals to enhance their success
Solution	Make the social reproduction visible to all. Challenge the structure. Almost impossible because the system functions without overt effort by the dominant group. Difficult because dominant group will adapt as group differentiation dissolves. Difficult because it is against the dominant groups' self interest to change the structures	Give those with inadequate social capital the capital they are missing. Fix the students and families who fail to participate in the social networks
Weaknesses	Denies individual agency and is overly deterministic	Denies oppressive structures and blames those parents excluded from more elite social networks. Ignores the fact that the dominant group will redefine the valued capital and credential if it fails to differentiate and maintain their privileged position. Fails to account for the role of habitus and field in enhancing or restricting the opportunities for social mobility

capital, a proxy for agency. But Bourdieu illustrates that such structures have an independence that individuals can barely affect, and, indeed, such structures are maintained by individual actions, a maintenance he explains by his formula: (habitus) (capital) + field = practice. Essentially, the objective condition constituting social relations is “fixed” by a logic of individual empowerment. Attention to social or cultural capital would not focus on individual choices or family deficiencies – these are unthinkable outside of the social relations that make them possible – but on the conditions that maintain class relations and which individuals, rather mechanically (a problem that Bourdieu’s theory cannot fully address), reproduce in a disguised form.

We should note that we do not seek to create a straw man argument here. We do not argue that Coleman read Bourdieu wrong, for he did not reference Bourdieu at all in his work. But it has been the tendency of many researchers of higher education to conflate the arguments of the two; that is, studies have referenced both Coleman and Bourdieu as authorities for their arguments about the importance of social capital in a process of educational attainment and social mobility, as if both made similar arguments (e.g., Kim and Schneider, 2005; Perna and Titus, 2005). We think the use of Coleman or this understanding of capital in such studies may indeed be coherent, since Coleman would justify a logic of using social capital as a way of understanding individual mobility; but we are not certain that their use of Bourdieu for such logic is correct, or at least such use should explain its re-appropriation of Bourdieu. Bourdieu, as we have been arguing, sees social capital as a part of the processes of social reproduction. He identifies social capital as the resources available to individuals and families as a result of the social networks, relationships, and familial connections that establish the norms and values of a social class and provides them with power and opportunity over those outside these networks (Bourdieu, 1986).

Coleman explains networks within a logic of human capital. While both Bourdieu and Coleman would consider an academic literary club as entailing more social capital than a network of single parents in a government-housing project, the latter theorist would likely suggest simply that people engage in academic literary clubs, while the former would go on to analyze how those with the more valuable forms of capital would seek to set themselves off from, and thus dominate, those with less valuable forms of capital. This oppressive aspect of social relations is ignored in Coleman’s conceptualization of social capital. He can only speak to the individual mobility associated with social capital but fails to account for the roles it plays in the social processes which will continue to demand that individuals own this or that kind of capital in order to be deemed worthy of the social resources invested in them.

In short, while Bourdieu distinguishes between the opportunities to obtain capital and the actual possession of capital, Coleman blurs these. Coleman does not address the systemic ways that those in privileged positions adapt to maintain their positions, while Bourdieu focuses on those very power relations. An understanding of social (or cultural) capital that fails to account for the role of habitus in enhancing or restricting the opportunities for social mobility, then, strips out what we believe to be the value of such understanding.

Having now laid out what we believe to be the essential components of Bourdieu's and Coleman's theories of cultural and/or social capital, we can now turn to how such theories have been used in the field of higher education. We will argue that it has been a liberal-humanist view of individual mobility that has been furthered by the uses of theories of capital to explain marginalization in higher education, not the structuralist view of social reproduction that underlies Bourdieu's sociology of education. We tease out what we believe to be the theoretical and political consequences of this (mis)translation.

## Troubled Translations

In the research on access to, and success in, higher education we see problematic assumptions regarding social and cultural capital. Our reading of this research leads us to conclude that it is built on a foundation more like Coleman's rather than Bourdieu's. Researchers have at times cited Bourdieu, Coleman, and Becker (as authority for the notion of human capital) in a somewhat troubled understanding of capital which seeks to reconcile both structure and agency. One example of such a study is Perna's (2000), which used econometric models that controlled for social and cultural capital and found that African-Americans were more likely than Whites to enroll in 4-year institutions (see also Perna, 2005).

Kim and Schneider (2005), examining transitions to selective postsecondary education, argue that "there are ways for parents who are educationally disadvantaged to improve their children's chances of being admitted to selective four-year colleges. However, this potential is critically linked to institutional programs guiding those parents and the efforts of high schools to persuade parents to participate in them" (pp. 1197–1198). They suggest that institutional agents can provide networks and information that "compensate for family networks when students' parents have limited economic and social resources" (p. 1184). Indeed, they conclude that students from more disadvantaged family backgrounds showed greater benefits from institutional action than more advantaged students (see also Berger, 2000; Pascarella et al., 2004; Perna and Titus, 2005; and Ream, 2005).

Similarly, the work of many researchers focuses on social or cultural capital as things that can be "given" to students to help them succeed, without fully extending the logic of habitus that goes with such concepts in Bourdieu's work. Walpole (2003) explains differences in graduate school attendance among low socioeconomic status (SES) students by suggesting that faculty (through working on a research project or talking with students outside of class) or students (through peer groups, athletics, and clubs) "somehow communicated a high SES habitus to low SES students" (p. 64). Walpole also implies that when low SES students choose to seek employment rather than continue on to graduate school it is attributable to their ignorance of the economic benefits of graduate school.

The accuracy of these findings is unassailable to us; that is, such researchers accurately describe the effects of social and cultural capital (assuming, of course,

that their proxies for such capital are valid, a point we do not contest here). What we question is the failure to extend social and cultural capital as theories of class relations to the US context to determine if they explain systemic patterns. For one, suggesting that simply “giving” students such capital will go a long way toward their empowerment downplays at least two things: first, there are other factors, including financial-aid caps, debt burden, and family responsibilities, that make, say, graduate schools a great challenge for low SES students; second, and more important, focusing on such supposed exchanges in knowledge obscures whether there are social processes in place that are designed to obscure such knowledge from low SES students.

Accounting for such processes might illuminate important social relations. If Bourdieu’s work has value in the United States, then it would lead us to watch for ways that dominant groups will alter what cultural capital will be valued once the nondominant groups have acquired the cultural and social capital that has been denied them. For example, according to a recent *Chronicle of Higher Education* article (Oxtoby, 2007), as more high schools in low-income communities offer Advanced Placement courses, some of the elite private schools have discontinued them, no longer considering them the best choice. Perhaps this choice is for innocuous reasons; alternatively it could be understood as an adjustment by the leaders of the dominant group in the power struggle among groups. As they help set the standard for the best college preparatory curriculum, it may be that they are changing in order to set themselves apart. Cultural capital is valuable when it creates distinctions from other groups in a process of social reproduction. Again, is it possible that the processes of social reproduction will change to ensure antagonistic class relations? Bourdieu’s sociology of education would suggest so. Of course, his sociology of education might not be a good fit in the United States, but our point is that his sociology should be extended to logical conclusion.

### *Less Troubled Translations*

Here we offer two examples of studies that we believe provide an analysis of reproductive processes. The work of Edward St. John, referencing Bourdieu, acknowledges the reproductive aspects of institutions of higher education, and his work convincingly points out how economic conditions, college pricing schemes, and financial-aid policy all work to ensure this social reproduction (see Paulsen and St. John 2002; St. John, 2006). We see this as aligned clearly with what we think is Bourdieu’s understanding of the objective conditions that ensure particular social relations. What we question in this study is the reliance on those very institutions that are crucial to the reproduction of social relations as solutions to social inequality. We think studies like this, which correctly point out how inequality is reproduced, stop with an unresolved contradiction if they also do not question institutions of higher education.

Similarly, Tierney and Jun’s (2001) work also relies on Bourdieu’s work, and they take on explicitly the assumption of cultural deficit that often characterizes the

studies of racial and ethnic minorities in education. They acknowledge and affirm the cultural backgrounds of students, and they have us attend to what they call “cultural integrity,” essential if we are to develop strategies to assist these students in attending college (see also Ream, 2005). Again, their understanding of the problem is clearly aligned with Bourdieu’s theories of domination, but their solutions stop short of where Bourdieu’s theories would take them. They do not make central an understanding of the dominating effects of institutions of higher education, which are actually put forth as the solution to the problem of domination. Bourdieu would suggest it is difficult to expect a tool of the oppressor to be the liberator. Bourdieu fails to offer a good solution, but to ignore the complicit role of the institution in the oppression is also dangerous.

To repeat, our critique of the studies above was less with their findings than with the fact that they did not extend Bourdieu’s theories to their logical conclusion, which to us is really a serious questioning of the practices of institutions of higher education, particularly the selective ones.

### *More Direct Translations*

We believe other studies more or less concern themselves with the role of higher education in an overall system of social relations. Most of these studies are of precollegiate settings and studies of college readiness, but we cite them here less for their subjects than for the logic. For example, Klein et al. (2000), adhering more strictly to Bourdieu’s work, suggest that accountability and testing systems exploit inequalities rather than improve them. They suggest that such accountability-based solutions do more harm than good when they lead to a teaching-to-the-test pedagogy, a narrowing of the curriculum to focus only on testable subjects, or pushing low-performing students out of school to raise test scores. Their study is a questioning of testing regimes rather than a study offering solutions to how marginalized students might do better on standardized tests. Similarly, Rothstein’s (2002) study concludes that the SAT is, essentially, a form of “affirmative action” for the wealthy in the college admissions process (p. 3). These studies suggest that policies privileging such testing further the distinctions between groups. In line with Bourdieu’s theory of cultural capital, they argue that schools are designed by those in power to reproduce current class structures and to legitimize class distinctions by defining merit and testing as the cultural capital of the wealthy.

Jeannie Oakes’ work on K–12 education and on access to a college preparatory curriculum has consistently applied Bourdieu’s social reproduction theory to critique school practices (Oakes, 1985; Oakes et al., 1997, 2002; Oakes and Wells, 1998). Oakes et al. (2002) suggest, for example, that the definition of merit and intelligence put forth by the privileged has hardened into common sense, so that the “cultural capital of White and wealthy families masquerades as meritorious ‘natural ability’ rather than as a function of social privilege” (p. 112). Oakes’ work requires that we ask ourselves to challenge the current definition of merit and intelligence

and to challenge criteria used to identify which students “merit” a rigorous curriculum. She argues that the tracking of students reflects a White upper-middle-class definition of intelligence, and under such logic minority students are by definition deemed deficient, since they cannot be White. It is not surprising, therefore, that minority students receive less rigorous curricula, thus legitimating the a priori expectation that these students would fail.

Oakes’ work illustrates well the class struggles that adherence to Bourdieu’s requires. In schools or districts where administrators may have started off with democratic intentions, they end up compromising the reforms to some degree in response to intense resistance (Oakes and Wells, 1998; Oakes et al., 2000). Similarly, some researchers have pointed to how powerful these parental social networks can be in getting the schools to work for them (Horvat et al., 2003). The point here, however, is that Oakes’ research (and a few others) more closely aligns with the kind of social critique to which a close reading of Bourdieu’s work would lead.

In the context of higher education, we think McDonough’s (1997) research offers a promising read of Bourdieu’s work. Her work on college choice is a recent example of the application of Bourdieu’s concept of the habitus in a study seeking to understand college access. McDonough demonstrated how social class and school governance (private versus public schools) influenced student access to higher education. Among McDonough’s findings were these: (1) low-income students were more likely to have a choice set of local higher education institutions, while upper-income students set their eyes on national and more prestigious institutions; (2) high schools with greater resources provided more individualized career and college admission counseling; and (3) high school guidance counselors served as gatekeepers for who were included on the college preparatory path. In subtle ways, guidance counselors working with the low-income public school students lowered students’ college choices under the auspices of helping students get a safe start. Her conclusion is that without structural changes schools would continue reproducing the current social order.

Similarly, Anderson’s (2005) article requires us to also focus on the curricular and pedagogic practices, and not just on access, in understanding why minority students are denied access to elite institutions. He illustrates that a diversity discourse available through texts disembodied from diverse students’ experiences advantages White students without offering similar benefits to minority students. Furthermore, elite colleges that separate race and class in the admissions process do so in ways that advantage those individuals with greater cultural capital, and their good intentions do little if they do not also address the systemic unequal distribution of educational opportunities.

Zweigenhaft’s (1993) study of differences in attainment and scholastic practices between public- and prep-school graduates at Harvard University also illustrates how the American elite reproduces itself. In spite of their lower SAT scores at admissions, students from the elitist private high schools had an advantage in admissions. Furthermore, the elite high school graduates differentiated themselves throughout not by their academic achievement but by the efforts to acquire and utilize their cultural capital. They earned lower grades than public school graduates but were more likely to pursue law school, a career Zweigenhaft suggests would utilize their cultural

capital, while public school students were more likely to acquire academic credentials through high grades and graduate school. Her findings and, more importantly, her interpretations are consistent with an understanding of cultural capital and of the particular role of elite institutions in the reproduction of class relations.

### *(Re)Translations or Capital Culture*

Having said that translations of Bourdieu's theory in the US context need to more closely align with his sociology of education, we have not offered a critique of whether his sociology could be easily translated. We think Bourdieu's theories offer those of us in the United States an important starting point for understanding social relations, relations which are masked by an overriding ideology of individualism. However, we also think that Bourdieu's theories cannot be easily translated, for they are expositions of a different context, one less troubled by a heuristic of class than we are here in the United States.

In the next section, we offer our take on what we think are promising avenues of thought in Bourdieu's theories, but we also offer a critique of these theories as well. This may seem odd to spend a great deal of this chapter explaining Bourdieu's theories, and showing how they have been mistranslated, and then to offer a critique of them, identifying the inadequacies of the original theory. But our commitments are not to any particular theory as much as to a desire to spark scholars of higher education to find ways of accounting for how social relations in the United States are (re)produced. Whether or not Bourdieu's work winds up having the most merit is important to us not because our professional reputations and career are tied to it, but because we are committed as scholars to pursuing work that allows us to change oppressive practices.

Bourdieu's theories of cultural and social capital reflected his European intellectual heritage of creating heuristics of class, unlike in the United States, which has an intellectual (and practical) heritage of focusing on individual liberties guaranteed by an almost blind adherence to liberalism (which is, paradoxically, an European idea which has been perfected in the United States). The American political imaginary understands its political and educational systems as existing in and supporting a fluid individualistic system (i.e., "we all can achieve the American dream") in which "classes" reflect less a concept for understanding stable social stratification than a temporal economic grouping of individuals, a myth which is a necessary illusion for its capitalist practices.

In the field of higher education the failure to account for the arbitrary and *interested* nature of social distinctions (e.g., parental credentials, student merit, intelligence, etc.) leaves one with little but a conclusion that greater cultural and social capital should be given those who have less. It is assumed, in other words, that if educators can provide cultural or social capital to the students without it, then those students can rise above their current position. We see this as the underlying assumptions in college-access programs or summer-bridge programs, which seek to give the students the information they otherwise lack (Hagedorn and Fogel, 2002), a laudable goal. Yet, Bourdieu (1977b) would suggest, we think, that such college-access

programs obscure the oppressive nature of the system, since their accommodation deflects attention from the systems' own mechanisms of distinction and exclusion. These programs are premised on a logic of individual lack, and as such they undermine the very democratic purposes intended by these programs, since they never challenge the arbitrariness of these distinctions that make those programs necessary in the first place. Clearly, programs can help the selected students who do participate. Our argument is not against these programs, but against ignoring the real worth of Bourdieu's writing: to highlight class structures and oppression. Bourdieu argues that allowing or assisting a few students through the obstacle course of college access obscures the systemic imbalance where some students do not have an obstacle course. In a sense, the successful few help protect the stability of the system. Bourdieu does not suggest that we give up but also does not provide good answers on how to change the system. However, he does provide insights into the system that are obscured when convoluted with theories of social mobility.

Thus, to the extent that the uses of cultural capital theories in the United States fail to analyze these relations, they also fail to see how they work in the processes of class domination. Educational institutions, and especially institutions of higher education, because they provide gateways to the professions and thus to the economic realm, determine social classes and the hierarchies associated with them, for they demarcate and reorganize individuals into groups: the well educated, the professionals, the liberally minded, the practitioners, and so on. Even our choice of labels may help the dominant class justify their oppression. If the understanding of individual agency predominates in our understanding of cultural capital, then those who fail to maximize their capital can be labeled dropouts without acknowledging the systemic structure that almost guaranteed their outcome. Cultural capital theories, therefore, can provide powerful lenses for uncovering and challenging oppressive class structures, even in spaces that are deemed not to have classes (or to have fluid ones), such as in the United States.

### *The "Individual" Myth*

A liberal view of schooling, even if premised on egalitarian or altruistic intentions, sees cultural capital in isolation from the class struggles (liberalism is a system that privileges the sovereignty and sanctity of the individual). This liberal view of schooling, when tied to egalitarian politics (and clearly it can be), takes as its premise a logic that one can simply "give" cultural capital to someone else who does not already have it, or to argue as Yosso (2005) does, that subordinated groups have their own stock of "cultural capital" which they use to mediate oppressive social structures. This may be true, but it misses the structural aspects behind Bourdieu's ideas of cultural and social capital, which imply that any stock of capital must be exchangeable into others for the purposes of maintaining or realigning class relations. The cultural capital of the single mothers in government housing does not convert to the same financial capital as the literary club.

Given Bourdieu's understanding of how cultural capital comes into being and how it works in a system of domination, it does not seem possible to us that his work can be used for ensuring individual access and achievement in higher education, for such access and achievement are determinants of how hierarchical class interests are legitimated in the United States. To cite Bourdieu for the point that access to higher education can be equalized by redistributing cultural capital to minority and low-income students illustrates a logic beset with a structural incoherence. It is to assume that a theory of domination can become a theory of salvation, which is not only problematic from a theoretical – and thus very practical – standpoint, but it also strips the original of its heuristic value: Its attention to the subtle forms of discrimination and oppression which take place through educational institutions that is a key value of the theory.

Part of the problem with the translation of theories of domination into theories of liberation has to do with the logic of the distinctions we make in the United States. In the United States the distinctions relate less to an elitism tied to particular classes that characterized the French social milieu that Bourdieu described than to an egalitarianism tied to liberalism that carries particular cultural force, and which cannot be rejected without some loss of the cultural coherence that characterizes the American way of life. For all the critiques of the 1983 report, *A Nation at Risk*, it does reflect a uniquely American belief that schools further individual much more than social interests, and, indeed, the latter can be served only by attending to the former:

All, regardless of race or class or economic status, are entitled to a fair chance and to the tools for developing their individual powers of mind and spirit to the utmost. This promise means that all children by virtue of their own efforts, competently guided, can hope to attain the mature and informed judgment needed to secure gainful employment and to *manage their own lives*, thereby serving not only their own interests but also the progress of society itself. (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983, p. 7)

The elevation of the idea of the individual supports the myth of equality of opportunity, which is, as Freeman (1998) suggested, presented both as a description and a transcendental ideal. It incorporates the twin universals of personal desert (self-fulfillment) and societal advantage (maximize the product). But in either form, it presupposes a world of atomistic individuals, without a rigid class structure, and an objective, transcendent notion of merit or qualification.

Equal opportunity, however, Freeman argued, is neither a description nor an ideal but an institutional ideology – an ideology that is the major rationalization of class domination in this country. Central to its effectiveness, Freeman argued, is the lived, internalized experience of lower class status as personal failure and as lack of ability. The disparity between the ideal and its practical realization should debunk it as a practice, but it continues to work because the idea of the individual's sovereignty and sanctity works to legitimize class distinctions (Freeman, 1998). It is the embeddedness of the sovereignty and sanctity of the individual in our social conscience that trumps fruitful (re)translations of theories that are premised on entirely contrary perspectives, even if those other perspectives might shed better, or, more accurately, different, light on power relations in the United States.

This is also probably why the idea of human capital (i.e., capital embodied in knowledge and skills) can be so easily attached to those of social and cultural capital

in many studies (e.g., Coleman, 1988; Perna, 2005). Notions of human capital do not require us to relinquish the myth of the individual that governs social life in the United States. The notion of human capital is distinct from that of social and cultural capital, at least as Bourdieu understood them, and it is our contention that many scholars in higher education have confused the two concepts. But human capital is a concept developed by neoclassical economics to explain *individual* behavior (agency), unlike cultural and social capital, which explain *class* behavior (structure) – even in Coleman’s (1988) view.

Research that simply seeks to increase the number of students from subordinated groups in prestigious institutions of higher education is democratic only to the extent that it advocates for more just bases for determining such access. Yet, also, to the extent it is premised on the notion of individual mobility it will only help individual minority or low-income students but do nothing to challenge the system that marginalizes these students in the first place. Moreover, by not challenging the system, such research only reinforces the right of the dominant class to continue to define what is valued. The education system, if Bourdieu is even remotely correct, must be challenged at its very roots: its pedagogy. It perpetuates initial inequities, so this pedagogic communication cannot be ignored in analyses of access. The educational system cannot feel the effects of social changes except in the form of pedagogic difficulties (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977). It is not enough, therefore, to focus only on students’ aspirations or parental behavior. What must be done as well is to make explicit and to challenge the ties the educational system, as the producer of legitimate cultural capital, has to the system of class relations in the social structure, relations made possible by the ease or difficulty associated with “reading” the pedagogic communication offered by institutions of education (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977; see also Bernstein, 1986 for a discussion of pedagogic discourse). The overall point here is that for Bourdieu social stratification is not threatened by granting access to select individuals who have been traditionally left out, so long as the dominated classes enter the game under the rules of the system and generally against their own interests (Bourdieu, 1984).

So far these arguments appear to affirm our complete acceptance of Bourdieu’s theory of social reproduction, but again, our task is not to spark studies that account for marginalization in all its forms, and we think there are aspects to Bourdieu’s theory that have the potential to exert their own form of domination. Again, we think Bourdieu’s theory of cultural capital is indeed of considerably more heuristic value than that of human capital, and thus comes with considerably less political consequences, but we do believe that Bourdieu fell into some traps that are worth teasing out before we can translate his theory beyond the French context.

### *The “Class” Myth*

We believe that to the extent that one uses capital theories to promote individual mobility, one essentially misuses a theory of classes (structure) for one of individuals (agency). Of course, theories of agency, often rational choice theories common in

the economics literature, such as human capital ones, should be questioned because those theories are premised on the myth of the individual. But if the individual is a myth, is agency possible? Yes, but only if one attends to the interplay between agency and structure. Power is, as Butler (1997) theorized, “never external or prior to the subject, nor can it be exclusively identified with the subject. If conditions of power are to persist, they must be reiterated” (p. 16). That is, institutions, structures, and relations are not disembodied concepts; they require reiteration in order to maintain their coherence as such. The conditions and structures of subordination, therefore, are “temporal,” since they must be enacted constantly in order to remain effective, and because they are temporal, they are vulnerable to redefinition at each moment of enactment.

We believe Bourdieu’s theories of social reproduction cannot be easily translated, at least without some misappropriation, because it is not completely adequate for understanding power relations in the United States and in other settings in which rigid lines between high and low classes do not exist. With regard to the United States, we think the theory of cultural capital over-determines class structures and focuses too little on human agency. His theory assumes that class distinctions, and thus classes themselves, are more static and stable over time and space than seems to be the case. Bourdieu seemed to understand the idea of class as Marx did, that is, as a formation, one to which, in addition to culture, can be attributed a class consciousness and a struggle (see Williams, 1983 for the evolution of the idea of class). There may be limits to the application of the theory of cultural capital in highly differentiated societies, particularly since Bourdieu developed his theories within a distinct national high-culture tradition, and so it appears tied to a strong assumption of high cultural hegemony. But in the United States, where high culture has not played quite the dominant role that it has in France, the concept seems stretched (Swartz, 1997). It stands for a universality that cannot be justified empirically (Brubaker, 1985). Indeed, the notion of habitus itself is too vague to be of complete use, for it fails to explain how it is both durable and transformable (DiMaggio, 1979).

Part of the difficulty in Bourdieu’s theories, especially in their translations to other context, then, lies in the term “class,” for in the United States, for example, the term class is used to designate economic categories, to which have been attributed more or less a culture. But the term “class” in the United States cannot stand for such simplistic categories. The class at issue in the United States, and in other heterogeneous countries – and we would guess even in France itself – cannot stand for a coherent ontological concept. A class here is a matter of perspective and of definition. Thus, a class can signify not only socioeconomic categories, but also racial, ethnic, linguistic, and sexual ones. This overlap is what, perhaps, makes class analysis particularly difficult in such contexts, and if class is useful in France then we would guess it is because these other “things” like race and sexuality are ignored, as we believe Bourdieu did.

In addition to the ontological status given to class, Bourdieu seems to belie his own project of seeking to move beyond the dichotomy of structure and agency, or, as he refers to it, the objectivism/subjectivism divide in the social sciences. His theory of social reproduction underestimates human agency, which clearly is

constrained by class structures, but is not completely captured or defined by them. Individuals do exercise, following Judith Butler (1997), an agency that emerges from the margins of power. As Butler points out, while Bourdieu's theory provides an important way of understanding how individuals incorporate class norms and conventions, it nevertheless fails to account for how individuals, once initiated, resist and confound those norms and conventions which regulate them.

Given how institutions of higher education have tended to reproduce social classes in American society, especially because, paradoxically, they do so by denying this reproduction and by exalting individualism; Bourdieu's arguments about habitus appear particularly seductive. But ultimately we find problematic the ontological status his theory of habitus confers to the idea of *class*, as if it had an empirically verifiable content of its own. It seems, in other words, to over-determine class behavior and sets up a problematic dichotomy between a dominant group and a dominated group. To be fair, Bourdieu argued that the habitus is not infallible (Bourdieu, 1984). And he asserts that his theory is governed by neither notions of agency nor structure. But it is hard for us to see, however, how the habitus does not entail a determinist theory of class, since interpersonal relations are "never, except in appearance, *individual-to-individual* relationships and that the truth of the interaction is never entirely contained in the interaction" (Bourdieu, 1977a, p. 81), or since the habitus "engenders all the thoughts, all the perceptions, and all the actions consistent with the particular conditions in which it is constituted" (Bourdieu, 1977a, p. 96).

Thus, to the extent one seeks to use cultural and social capital theories as intended, that is, as determinative of class structures, one fails to give an adequate account of power relations if such theories provide no account of the interplay between agency and structure. And the value of the theory of cultural capital espoused by Bourdieu is its heuristic of struggle. But such struggle should be understood in particular fields and in particular sites within those fields (the local sites of enactment, e.g., an individual attending a college), for it is in the local sites of the interplay of structures and agency in which individuals live, and so promising empirical analyses of Bourdieu's theories attend to those local sites, even if they come at the expense of easy measurement (see Lamont and Lareau, 1988, for a good explanation of the need to focus on the struggle that takes place "on site," so to speak). Indeed, the search for easy measurement which permits generalizations may be part of the ways in which academic classifications work to maintain social structures.

## Conclusion

When research relates to marginalized social groups, such as racial minorities or "at risk" students, but fails to account for the social processes that lead to their marginalization, they cover struggles over classifications that will govern the social positions of groups. Researchers who put forward empirical evidence about individuals and groups would be well advised to remember, Bourdieu warns, that such empirical

evidence captures only a particular moment or state in the struggle to make and unmake groups (Bourdieu, 1991). If any of this is possible, we might conceive of institutions of higher education as both weapons and as prizes in a political struggle.

It is difficult for us to argue against any research that seeks to close the socioeconomic gap between wealthy and poor students, to make better the conditions of social minorities, and so on. But even when researchers adopt the particular vantage points of those who suffer oppression, if they fail to describe the game in which those vantage points, and the beliefs underlying them, are produced, then they invoke one among many contributions to the creation of beliefs whose foundations and social effects should be described (Bourdieu, 1991). It is by letting go of the dream of “royal science,” as Bourdieu puts it, that scientists can take up as their object the game whose stake is the power to govern the vision of the world, and in which researchers have no choice but to mystify or demystify that game (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 227). In short, we must question ourselves and the role we play in social struggles. If we question the systemic processes that ensure stratification, and the key institutions that guarantee and are guaranteed such processes, then we will have played our part in changing them. This questioning, we might say, comes with a risk: it puts at risk those very institutions which grant researchers the authority to do research. But those are the stakes in the game to which Bourdieu refers.

Education as a field often draws on theories, knowledge, and research from other venues, intellectual and geographical. What we hope readers see in our analysis is not an argument for a whole-scale rejection of the notion of cultural or social capital, but for a reconsideration of how it can be made useful in furthering social equity (i.e., by highlighting oppressive institutional practices, and by attending to how these work in local sites of enactment). Our first task, however, is to “trap *Homo Academicus*, supreme classifier among classifiers, in the net of his own classifications” (Bourdieu, 1988, p. xi). In other words, we must be leery of our own academic theories, for they are as political as the forces we seek to describe with them.

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