



# Pierre Bourdieu

## Key Concepts

SECOND EDITION



Edited by  
**Michael Grenfell**

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# Pierre Bourdieu

## Key Concepts

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## Preface to the second edition

The second edition of this book has afforded us the opportunity to review, revise and extend our coverage of the work of Pierre Bourdieu. Each chapter has been reconsidered by the contributing authors with a view to bringing the bibliography up to date, developing discussion and clarifying points from the first edition. However, we have also added an entire new part entitled “Applications”. Having completed the first edition of the book, I felt there was a need to include something about actually using these concepts in practice, which I then did in the form of a postscript on methodological principles. Here, I set out a framework for conducting research from a Bourdieusian perspective in terms of key elements to be adopted by the would-be researcher. This postscript has now been extended to an entire chapter, which is complemented by two other chapters on “Social Space” and “Politics”. The first of these develops methodological concerns when constructing and representing social contexts, and offers examples and guidance on how to think of space in these terms. The chapter on politics reminds us of the radical intent behind much of Bourdieu’s work, and considers the way these ideas may impact in the political arena and society at large.

A new edition also allows us to respond to our critics. On the whole, the book has been well received by reviewers, and it has been popular among researchers and students interested in working with Bourdieu. From the outset, I knew that to deal with each concept one by one was a hazardous project. In much of my own writing, I insisted that all of the concepts had to be viewed in an integrated form, not cut up and used discretely on their own. Nevertheless, I did feel there

was something to be gained by taking each one by one and, in a way, looking at the others through that individual lens. Some reviewers have been keen to point out the dangers of such an enterprise. For one, even to talk about subjectivity and objectivity was tacitly to approve a dichotomy that would be divisive. Others have seen a more logical priority between field and habitus, or again insisted that you cannot talk about one without the other. Bourdieu's epistemology always has required a kind of dialectical thinking, which necessitates keeping at least one thing in mind while considering another. I am, therefore, happy to stress again that in reading through the concepts one by one, the reader must develop a view of the overall picture – how ultimately all of them are of one and the same epistemology. I also felt the need to create more of a narrative structure to the book, so introduced part headings and introductions. Again, these should be seen as facilitating digestion of the main concepts rather than implying any substantive theoretical intent. This new edition has allowed us to both sharpen and nuance these aspects of the book while preserving its principal format.

Of course, the popularity of the book is finally testament to the value that many still find in the work of Pierre Bourdieu, some ten years after his death. Interest in the potential of his ideas in an ever-increasing number of fields seems to grow unabated. There is a danger in such mass adoption. Bourdieu himself described his approach as “structural constructivism”, and there has been a tendency among some researchers to develop a weak form of constructivism where social phenomena are described in terms of a broad range of influences, often with a smattering of Bourdieusian concepts. This approach overly metaphorizes data rather than offering a genuine “field analysis”. How to do that and represent it remains a challenge. Various forms of geometric analysis were used by Bourdieu, and some of these are finally becoming more common among researchers. However, they require specialist training and support, as well as complementing with extensive ethnographic analyses if we are to capture the *logic of practice* of fields. Multiple correspondence analysis can never be an end in itself.

The potential of Bourdieu's insight into the working of social systems is both inspiring and daunting. He himself often claimed that most of his career was taken with publishing “the work of his youth”. And, indeed, the type of studies necessary for a full account of field workings requires long and meticulous analyses, along with mastery of a range of data-handling techniques. We should not be hidebound by too doctrinaire an attitude to the concepts. Conversely, we also need to be conceptually ascetic in proposing further terminology, remembering that each new addition to the arsenal must be logically necessitated

by the data and needed because no other existing term will do. At the same time, it is important to remember that the world in which we now live is vastly different from the one that Bourdieu faced in his major studies, even in the later decades of his career. For example, what does a field analysis look like in virtual social space now that the Internet offers such an endless range of networking possibilities? One reviewer has also pointed out how anthropocentric Bourdieu's work now seems; there is a need to consider "natural capital" when faced with the growing destruction of beings and ecosystems by industrial capitalism. The economic world is now also on the brink of financial collapse, paradoxically brought to its knees by the lack of control over credit that was supposed to be at the defining core of monetarism and neo-liberal economics. In this sense, Bourdieu scholars need to get "up to date", while remaining true to the original vision.

Finally, as noted, we must remember that Bourdieu's theory of practice was *of a purpose*. On the one hand, what was at stake was truth itself; but, on the other hand, truth with a view to a universal, humanistic project to "restore to men and women the meaning of their actions" – and with that the intent to improve their lot! Reflexivity is a core to the project, both for researchers in adopting this approach and in the use that is made of findings. Realization of the potential of this reflexive element to Bourdieu is still hardly understood, let alone used in practice.

This new edition is offered very much with these concerns in mind, and so with an ongoing commitment to explore, develop and apply the principles embedded in Bourdieu's key concepts.

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# Introduction

*Michael Grenfell*

Pierre Bourdieu is now regarded as one of the foremost social philosophers of the twentieth century. Born in a small village in the French Pyrenees, his extraordinary academic trajectory took him to the leading academic training schools of Paris. Eventually, he was nominated as “Chair” at the Collège de France, that most prestigious of institutions, which groups together fifty-two of the leading French academics, philosophers and scientists.

Bourdieu’s output was voluminous. Beginning with ethnographies of the Béarn and Algeria, he went on to offer extensive studies of education, culture, art and language. For much of this time, Bourdieu was regarded as a sociologist, and he had a major influence in this academic field. However, his was a very particular type of sociology. His academic training was as a philosopher. It was only after personal experiences “in the field” in Algeria and the Béarn that he abandoned the traditional academic route of philosophy for sociology. This was in the 1950s, a time when sociology had not yet acquired its contemporary popularity or academic credibility. Certainly, his early works can be read as anthropologically orientated, a perspective he never really lost over the subsequent fifty years of his career.

During the 1960s and 1970s, Bourdieu seemed very much the private academic, sharing the Parisian intellectual world with other leading French writers such as Foucault, Derrida, Barthes, Lyotard, Althusser and Lacan. Increasingly, however, he became a public figure, rivalling the reputations of writers in his immediately preceding generation – for example, Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir. Later in life, his interventions in politics became more frequent; first,

in advising the new Socialist government in France in the 1980s, and later still supporting a number of pressure groups in mounting what he called “acts of resistance” to the dominant political, economic and social trends of the day. At this time, he published further work on the media, painting, economics and gender politics. In 1992 he published *The Weight of the World*, an extensive series of accounts of “social suffering” across French society. This work became a best-seller and projected Bourdieu into the media spotlight. From this point, Bourdieu increasingly offered his theory and practice as a kind of “philosophy for everyman”, as a way of coping with contemporary living.

Since his death in 2002, Bourdieu’s influence has continued to grow. His own major work and publications were in the areas of Algeria, anthropology, education and culture. However, as noted above, his output covered many other fields: economics, politics, art, philosophy, law, religion, media, language, gender, history, and so on; and it is now common to see his work referred to in a wide range of academic disciplines, from geography to theology. This applicability and adaptability is in many ways a measure of the worth of Bourdieu’s approach to the social sciences. Two features characterize it: first, a particular understanding of the link between theory and practice, and how these should feature in social science research practice; and second, a unique individual set of conceptual terms to be employed in the course of analysis and discussion of findings. These terms, which he called his “thinking tools”, emerged in the course of his empirical studies, and are used to explain and illuminate the social processes uncovered there. Bourdieu argued that he never really theorized as such; his starting point was always a particular social phenomenon or practice. Certainly, any study to be undertaken within a Bourdieusian framework must begin with real, empirical data. Nevertheless, what he has left amounts to a Bourdieusian language as such – a language which can be used literally to think with.

This book deals with my own selection of his principal terms. Rather than take a thematic approach to discussing Bourdieu, each chapter focuses on one of his particular key concepts; for example, *habitus*, *field*, *capital*, and so on. It is important to stress that these should not be seen as being independent entities. Rather, they are all interconnected, making up the structure and conditions of the social contexts Bourdieu studied. To alight on one particular concept is therefore simply to see the world from that perspective. The contributors to this volume have all used Bourdieu in their own work. Each has responded to the challenge of considering a particular concept and

has written about it from their own perspective. The book as a whole covers the following:

- discussion of the meaning of each concept: how it is defined by Bourdieu;
- the background and history of each concept;
- which other authors can be connected with the concept, and how their definitions of it differ from Bourdieu's own;
- when and where Bourdieu used the concept, and why;
- how the concept developed during his work, as well as links with other disciplines such as anthropology and philosophy;
- how the concepts might be adapted and applied to other topics in the social sciences and why, as well as the issues arising in doing so.

While the book covers the above framework, individual chapters focus on particular aspects in response to the concept under discussion, from the author's own viewpoint.

Each chapter can be read as both an elucidation and evaluation of each individual concept. Approaching the concepts in this way offers an opportunity for individual perspectives and responses in interpreting and thinking with Bourdieu. It also opens up key questions of relevance and applicability.

The chapters need to be read both individually and together. Individually, they elucidate a particular concept so as to broaden our understanding of it, including the range of dimensions encompassed by it. In this way, we see that these concepts are not simply descriptive terms, but embody a dynamic epistemology which makes them active tools for deployment in the social sciences. At the same time, reading the chapters together uncovers the ways in which the concepts interpenetrate and how together they build up a particular worldview. To aid reading, the book is divided into five main parts: "Biography, theory and practice"; "Field theory – beyond subjectivity and objectivity"; "Field mechanisms"; "Field conditions"; and "Applications".

**Part I** gives a biographical basis – Bourdieu's life and times – to the book. It is entitled "Biography, theory and practice". In **Chapter 1**, there is a brief coverage of Bourdieu's own biography, where he grew up and his main professional trajectory. Bourdieu always insisted that his work be set in the times which produced it. There is, therefore, an account of the contemporary events that shaped Bourdieu's life. Finally, **Chapter 1** places Bourdieu in the intellectual tradition of which he was a participant. Crucial to appreciating the provenance



and significance of Bourdieu's concepts is an understanding of what he termed his "theory of practice". This issue involves a discussion of the relationship between theory and practice and how they mutually express each other. [Chapter 2](#) extends the biographical perspective on Bourdieu by drawing out further the intellectual issues which shaped his philosophy, both in terms of personal background and intellectual trajectory. Here, we consider how a life experience itself can shape personal perspectives on issues of theory and practice. [Chapters 1](#) and [2](#) are offered to give a background to Bourdieu's work, both from a personal and socio-historical point of view. They set his work in context and show how it developed over the course of his career, indicating the salient influences – both intellectually and socio-politically.

[Part II](#) is entitled "Field theory – beyond subjectivity and objectivity". As stated above, Bourdieu's primary concern was always to elucidate the practical problems he encountered, and it was in the course of engaging with them that his concepts were developed to explain the phenomena he discovered. Nevertheless, in the course of his career, his approach did grow into a fully fledged methodology or approach, which he termed "field theory"; and the concept of *field* certainly became a leitmotif for Bourdieu as his methodology developed. With *field*, Bourdieu was able to map objective structural relations. However, he also needed to show how such objectivity was constructed by individual subjectivities, constituted by their *habitus*, a term he borrowed from antiquity. This second part of the book looks at these two principal concepts to his theory: *habitus* ([Chapter 3](#)) and *field* ([Chapter 4](#)). There is discussion of what each term means and how each was derived. In the introduction to this part, we further consider the underlying philosophical issues in Bourdieu's "theory of practice", since only such an understanding can explain the need for these terms. A key theme in the social sciences has indeed been the tension between subjectivity and objectivity: we address the components of this issue and discuss the ways Bourdieu's approach aims to reconcile the oppositions to be found there.

[Part III](#) considers the structure and operations of fields under the title "Field mechanisms". Since Bourdieu was a sociologist, one of his main preoccupations was the structure of social class in society. [Chapter 5](#) addresses what Bourdieu understood by *social class* and the implications this had for other approaches to the topic. *Fields* partly define themselves in terms of an orthodox way of doing things. [Chapter 7](#) discusses how Bourdieu saw such orthodoxy operating in fields as *doxa*. [Chapter 6](#) focuses on the main medium of field

operations – *capital*. Much of Bourdieu’s work demonstrates the way by which we should see *habitus* and *field* as mutually constitutive. However, they can also get out of step with each other. The final chapter in [Part III](#) deals with this phenomenon – *hysteresis* – and shows how it occurs in contemporary life.

[Part IV](#) of the book takes further the nature of field operations. Here, we consider “Field conditions”: in other words, what other processes occur within a field to shape social phenomena. [Chapter 9](#), on *interest*, asks questions about the underlying motives and reasons that may be found around the choices and decisions individuals make which constitute their social action. Issues surrounding *conatus* ([Chapter 10](#)) take further aspects of individual psychologies and cognition as part of social practice. [Chapter 11](#) in [Part IV](#) returns us to another issue at the core of Bourdieu’s own practice – suffering. Bourdieu increasingly saw his methodology as a way of “liberating” individuals – and society – from the imposing social forces that dominated them. That we live in an age of social tension and friction is unquestionable. Bourdieu saw “social suffering” and “symbolic violence” as inherent features of society. This chapter shows how this is so. Bourdieu’s method has “reflexivity” at its core. The final chapter in [Part IV](#) then addresses what constitutes “reflexivity” for Bourdieu – in what way was his a “reflexive method”? In particular, this chapter shows how such reflexivity is crucial to social scientists in the positions they adopt with regard to their research.

I have already emphasized the way in which Bourdieu’s theoretical perspectives should be seen above all as providing practical tools for exploring a range of social contexts. [Part V](#) of this book develops this aspect of his work. [Chapter 13](#) addresses what constitutes a Bourdieusian methodology. This chapter offers a detailed discussion of the construction of the research object within a Bourdieusian frame, the principles of field analysis and how to structure this, and once again stresses the all-important reflexive dimension of Bourdieu’s approach. Much of Bourdieu’s own work can be seen as “explorations in field theory”, and how the issue of “social space” is central to that endeavour. [Chapter 14](#) therefore offers an extended account of social space, how to conceptualize it, and the way in which we might represent it in analyses. Practical applications are offered. Bourdieu’s work can never be seen as an end in itself, but an undertaking with real social and political implications. The posthumous publication *Interventions* (2008 [2002]) showed the extent of his political engagement throughout his career. [Chapter 15](#) therefore provides a range of theoretical and practical issues with regard to politics and political

activism. A brief conclusion offers a reprise to the book, which is followed by a chronology of Bourdieu's main life events and publications.

There were three principal aims in presenting this book. First, to offer a concise coverage of each of Bourdieu's key concepts that may be useful to those embarking on a study of Bourdieu. [Parts I](#) and [II](#) will be particularly useful for these readers. Second, to develop the discussion in such a way that those already familiar with Bourdieu's terms may be encouraged to rethink and reconsider them in their own work. Each of the concepts in [Parts III](#) and [IV](#) are worthy of in-depth consideration, while [Parts I](#) and [II](#) will draw attention to further aspects of key terms. Third, to offer what amounts to a worldview from a Bourdieusian perspective, as a way of encouraging others to develop and apply it in their own methods and disciplines; [Part V](#) in particular attempts to do this. There are then different ways of reading and working with this book. However, whichever approach is adopted primarily by the reader, we hope that the others will also form part of their engagement with it.

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PART I

# Biography, theory and practice

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# Introduction

**Part I** of this book is entitled “Biography, theory and practice”. It comprises two chapters, which span these three principal strands in Bourdieu’s work.

**Chapter 1** begins with a brief outline of Bourdieu’s life and works. This sets a framework for what follows. It is emphasized how important it is to read Bourdieu’s ideas primarily in terms of the current practical problems and issues of the day before any contemporary use is made of them. A sketch is subsequently offered of the events which surrounded Bourdieu’s life and impacted on his thinking. This account includes the social, cultural, historical, political and economic. Bourdieu was active professionally for almost exactly the fifty years of the second half of the twentieth century. This section details some of the salient trends in this time period; in particular, with respect to France. In the final section of **Chapter 1**, Bourdieu is located within the intellectual tradition of which he formed a part. This tradition is linked to the eighteenth-century Age of Enlightenment and the French *philosophes* who were its key thinkers. As noted earlier, Bourdieu originally trained in philosophy before embracing sociology as the focus for his writing. This section begins to unpick the various strands in his theory of practice, with reference to the founding fathers of sociology – Marx, Durkheim and Weber, French Catholic intellectuals of the 1930s and 1940s, the European tradition of phenomenology, and the leading intellectual figures of his formative years, namely Sartre and Lévi-Strauss. The ideas within this background are also contrasted with those of other writers on the history of the philosophy of science, such as Gaston Bachelard and Georges Canguilhem. These two phi-

losophers were particularly influential on Bourdieu's thinking about the relationship between theory and practice in the social sciences. They also can be seen as contributing to the intellectual climate that gave birth to post-modernism. This link is made as the discussion is brought up to date by contrasting this European tradition with twentieth-century American sociology and writers active within so-called rational action theory.

[Chapter 2](#) builds on the [first chapter](#) and further develops the connections between Bourdieu's biography and his theory of practice. It begins with Bourdieu's own home background and the possible congruities between his domestic experience and the ideas which would influence him. This experience is developed in terms of his early work on education and the kind of approach he was beginning to adopt. The essential elements of Marxist and phenomenological science are stressed. This coverage builds to a discussion of Bourdieu's founding methodological statement of 1968 – *Le métier de sociologue*. The centrality of Bachelard's work to Bourdieu's own thinking is also emphasized with reference to the “three degrees of monitoring” necessary to a truly “practical theory of social practices”. [Chapter 2](#) therefore offers a philosophical background against which the detail of the introduction to [Part II](#) can be read. It can also be read as an epistemological warning to those who might reify the concepts that follow as concrete entities, or metaphorical narratives, rather than approaching them as necessary tools to understanding the logic of fields in practice.

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ONE

# Biography

*Michael Grenfell*

## Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to offer a sketch of Bourdieu's biography. There are various issues to consider. For much of his life, Bourdieu was against biography, both in terms of his own personal life details and, in fact, biographical studies in general. In an article published in 1986 in *Actes de la recherche en science sociales*, he writes of "l'illusion biographique".<sup>1</sup> Here, he sets out his major objections to conventional biographies. He takes exception to the accounts of people's lives as constructed by historians and ethnographers, not to mention sociologists. He sets himself against these "lives" for their constructed coherence and the implied objective and subjective intentions behind the action of individuals involved. He sees this tendency revealed in the very language used by biographers: "already", "from that moment", "from his youngest age", "always". Briefly, Bourdieu objects to tidy chronologies of lives lived in a sort of pre-ordered, if not pre-ordained, manner.

Bourdieu spent most of his life avoiding reference to his personal life and, even now, we only have the most basic information. However, there is a paradox. As we shall see, Bourdieu's reflexive approach was predicated on the sociologist "objectifying" the process of objectification (see Grenfell 2004b for a fuller account). Central to this method was the need to apply the same epistemological concepts to the "knowing subject" itself as well as the object of research. How to operate such an approach then becomes a crucial question, and biography must feature in this undertaking. Bourdieu claimed he had



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