This Week's Citation Classic

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Reproduction is the English translation of a book published in French in 1970. Building on the 1964 ethnographic work Inheritor's Account (Les Invertis; published in 1979), it sets forth a theoretical model and an empirical analysis of the complex mechanisms through which the school system contributes to the reproduction of the structure of class and social relations. The SSC suggests that this book, in its French and English versions, has been cited in over 215 and 290 publications, respectively.

How Schools Help Reproduce the Social Order
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Among the causes of the success of this study, which I wish was no longer read in isolation from my other works, the most obvious is arguably, along with the timing of its publication, its title, which made it the emblem of a new paradigm. (I cite here several works that are closely linked to Reproduction, the first two of which provide a perspective on classroom interaction that anticipates the analyses of ethnographers and ethnomethodologists, such as A.V. Cicourel.) The cost of this more or less acknowledged position of theoretical leadership, however, is the scholarly simplification—if not outright distortion—of the scientific thesis it propounded. Its advocates and adversaries alike have often joined in reducing the involved analysis of the extremely sophisticated mechanisms by which the school system contributes to reproducing the structure of the distribution of cultural capitals, and, through it, the social structure (and this, only to the extent to which this relational structure itself, as a system of positional differences and distances, depends upon this distribution) to the ahistorical view that society reproduces itself mechanically, identical to itself, without transformation or deformation, and by excluding all individual mobility. It was no doubt easier, once such a radical simplification had been effected, to charge this theory with being incapable of accounting for change or with ignoring the resistance of the dominated—to many interpretations that a close reading of the book, along with the empirical research in which it was grounded, suffices to put aside.

To appraise fully the effort that resulted in Reproduction, one must have in mind what the dominant theoretical mood of the 1960s was. Indeed, a full appreciation of the place of Reproduction among works in the sociology of education, which crystallized rapidly in the US during the 1970s, in the direction it had charted, requires that one pay notice to the original date of its publication and of its companion volume, The Inheritors. The word "mutation" had become the buzzword of many sociologists, particularly among those in the extraordinary "mobility" of American society, proclaiming the demise of class, held that ascension was finally and forever giving way to "achievement." Contrary to all these notions, Reproduction sought to propose a model of the social mediations and processes that—unbeknownst to the agents of the school system (teachers, students, and their parents)—prolonged against their will—tended to ensure the transmission of cultural capital across generations and to stamp preexisting differences in inherited cultural capital with the meritocratic seal of academic consecration by virtue of the special symbolic potency of the title (credential). Functioning in the manner of a highly classificatory machine that inscribes changes within the purview of the structure, the school helps to make and to impose the legitimate exclusions and inclusions that form the basis of the social order.

In a forthcoming book entitled The School Nobility, which brings together the results of a whole array of investigations, some of which were undertaken well prior to writing the "work of youth" that Reproduction is, I will demonstrate that educational titles or credentials fulfill, in a different historical context, a social function analogous to that which beset nobility titles in earlier times. The symbolic efficacy of educational titles lies in that they not only guarantee technical competency but also, as the public attestation of "gifts" or individual "merits," consecrate a true social essence. Whence the ambiguity of the "progress" that has taken us from the collective and hereditary statuses of the nobility, in the strict sense of the word, to today's school nobility. If the degree of achievement and of technical proficiency acquired by the dominant has never been higher, it nevertheless remains that they continue to stand in close statistical relation to social origins, to birth, that is, to ascription. And, in societies that claim to recognize individuals only as equals in right, the educational system and its modern nobility only contribute to disguise, and thus legitimate, in a more subtle way, the arbitrariness of the distribution of powers and privileges that perpetuates itself through the socially uneven allocation of academic titles.