

# ON PIERRE BOURDIEU

## PART 2: SYSTEMS OF DOMINATION

The text for this series is David Swartz' book, *Culture and Power: The Sociology of Pierre Bourdieu*. Swartz says that the central focus of Bourdieu's work is how in a given culture the systems of domination reproduce themselves in such a way that it seems natural and obvious, so that there is no resistance and so that neither the beneficiaries nor the non-dominant people recognize the forces at work. The hope is that understanding the way these systems operate will give us a chance to affect change that benefits them even if there is a loss to the dominant elites. The need for this should be quite obvious as we watch elites in the US, the UK and other more or less democratic nations slowly drive us to collapse while authoritarian governments survive. Change is not without its own dangers, of course.

Swartz opens with this sentence:

Culture provides the very grounds for human communication and interaction; it is also a source of domination. P. 1.

As an example, Bourdieu spent a lot of energy studying the education sector. He himself was an outsider, born in 1930 to a working class family in a small town in southwestern France. He began his studies in rural schools and only at the age of 19 did he move to Paris to continue his studies, first in a prestigious Lycée and then at the top French school, the Ecole Normale Supérieure, where he studied with and under many of the leading French intellectuals of the day. Although some of his fellow students were from similar backgrounds, including Michel Foucault, most were upper class Parisians. This no doubt gave impetus to his study of the way French intellectuals reproduce their dominance across

generations. Swartz explains:

Educational institutions secure partial autonomy from political intervention and economic constraints by establishing their own criteria for legitimation and by recruiting and training their own personnel—that is, by securing control over their own reproduction. P. 77.

This should be obvious. Academia has been reproducing itself this way since it began, and it seems logical and natural that new teachers would begin by learning from experienced and knowledgeable teachers. But it is far from universal, we in the US are in danger of treating it as a factoid, a given, and taking it in isolation. If we did that, we might add the fact that people like to hire people who are like them, so we would draw the conclusion that this is a problem because it tends to exclude people who aren't like existing teachers in some unacceptable way, such as gender or skin color. Or we might say that it is good because it removes the government from the academy regardless of whatever flaws there might be.

Bourdieu embeds the fact in a theory. The theory is that society is organized to reproduce itself in a natural and unthreatening way, so that members of society, elites and others, don't see the machine at work and are strongly inclined to accept things as they are. When we see it this way, we ask different questions. For example, we see clearly how legacy admissions to elite universities serve the goal of perpetuating the domination of the elites. Their children get an edge that is invisible to most people; only the smart kid from Enid OK who didn't get into Yale sees it, and people write her off as bitter. Then legacies get an edge in taking power in government, corporations and other sectors, including education.

A 2011 survey of 30 top universities found that legacies had a 45% greater chance of admissions than non-legacies. Even when legacies are

reasonably competent compared to the other applicants, this advantage is a natural way to recreate the dominance of the existing elites. I don't doubt that Chelsea Clinton is bright, though obviously Jared Kushner is a tougher call. The point is that Clinton and Kushner are certain to reproduce the attitudes and politics of their parents. Their slots at Stanford and Harvard did not go to equally qualified people from non-elite backgrounds, and the same is true of all the slots that went to the legacies. On the other hand, I'm just sure both Clinton and Kushner see themselves as hard-working meritocrats, succeeding because they are special.

But that isn't all we can see. The elites don't like the idea that they don't get to influence academia. They intend to deploy their wealth as they see fit (the link is to my post on oligarchy in democracy, and may be of interest for further links), and aren't interested in hearing from the rest of us; they don't want democratic control of anything. Thus we get charter schools that can easily be used to teach kids that society is organized to facilitate the capitalist mode of production and that joyful participation is the way to succeed in life. If you don't succeed in this way, you are a loser who deserves to suffer. If this schooling is successful, the profits and losses are irrelevant to the rich.

The rich have led the way in bringing business methods into the university. Today the focus is on job-oriented education as a replacement for liberal arts, in other words on vocational training instead of learning to think clearly and objectively. Education, if that's the word, becomes a consumer object, with the student as consumer. As in business, the goal is to drive down the costs of labor, hence the use of miserably-paid and abused adjuncts. Meanwhile endowments grow repulsively big. We can easily see Yale and Harvard as hedge funds with a few attached schoolrooms, dorms and gyms.

But Bourdieu's question is merely the apex of a framework. There is a broader and deeper analysis of society that establishes the framework, and makes it easier to apply to a wider range of strategies and rationalities supporting the central point, that societies and especially elites are organized to reproduce themselves and their dominance as covertly as possible. The carceral state is the tool for dealing with the dissidents and the non-conformists.