

A Love Letter to Bourdieu

*First year doctoral student, **Nell Beecham**, describes how her love of Pierre Bourdieu's work is why she chose to study sociology.*



At 16 I fell in love. I hung on his every word, I wanted to move to Paris, to learn French, to stay up all night long talking about theory. He was magical, an intellectual, four and a half times my age, and sadly dead.

It was 2007 and I had just moved into a selective sixth form in the leafy suburbs of North London. Today I will tell you that joining that school was the best thing that ever happened to me, but five weeks into the first term I cried into my father's arms and tried to figure out if there was any way I could move back to my old school. I had no friends and lagged behind in all my classes. I had hated my old school but at least I knew the rules: what to wear, what music to listen to, who to talk to and crucially who not to talk to. I was a square peg in a round hole there, but the safety of being governed by a set of codes that made sense to me seemed preferable to perpetual confusion and getting things wrong. It is a lot easier to accept being a loser if you understand why you are one.

Half term arrived, and I spent the week discussing the findings of my new school with friends from home: I told them of the long school days, the expectation to complete homework, and the weird clothes the people there wore- Jack Wills (which I incorrectly reported as Jack Willis), Abercrombie and Fitch, Hollister; why would you spend £70 on a plain hoodie when a pair of Nikes were the same price.

The next 6 weeks came and left in a flash, I found my group and made up my grades. There were lots of kids like me; it was a melting pot of social groups, students had moved from both private and state school to join the sixth form. But something stuck. We all got on well in lessons, but when the bell rang for lunch we all dispersed into our own social groups a la Mean Girls. But these groups could be near matched to postcodes, ethnicity or type of school previously attended.

Then, just after Christmas, along came Bourdieu.

There had been a few before him, I had engaged in brief affairs with Marx and Weber and whilst we never truly parted ways, Bourdieu's entry into my life changed everything.

To a purist we took things slow, just looking at theories of capital accrual. But my 16 year old mind was blown, he had explained every feeling I had experienced using social theory and we hadn't

even got to habitus clivé. I bought my first copy of *Distinction* in 2007: didn't understand a word of it, so bought a companion reader.

What I loved about Bourdieu was that he described a model of class in which power is socially and symbolically created, behaviours could be mapped onto bigger historical sets of knowledge and practices. I had been let in on one of life's biggest secrets: that there were rules to the game, and that knowing these rules makes it easier to play.

Bourdieu threw my assumptions about what was 'good' or 'deserved' in the balance. I was forced to acknowledge that resources were not fairly distributed, and that the resources required to 'get on' were not always easily identifiable. They stretched beyond purely economic factors, and into knowledge of cultural articles, such as art, theatre, and politics. Moreover, that it was not simply enough to 'know', you had to have the right language to talk about these things in the 'correct' way.

Some might say, he simply appealed to that teenage side of me that could finally find justice in saying 'it's not fair'. But Bourdieu allowed me to follow up with 'here is why'.

With Bourdieu by my side I learnt to decode how people made subtle distinctions and how cultural knowledge was deployed in conversation to assert authority or make connections. My sixth form became the perfect site of study, a microcosm in which people from different backgrounds met. I realised that it was the ability to read class through the lens of capitals that enabled the students there to decipher between those who had capitals that 'fit' within their social space, and those who do not. Finally there was an explanation as to why certain groups in my school hung around together! My eyes were opened and my world became an ethnography.

Reading Bourdieu I learnt to hear the unsaid. He gave me a language with which to give my feelings a name and a place. Although, it wasn't until many years later that I learnt to give these a sense of injustice, Bourdieu gave me a set of questions I desired answers to. Questions about how class is formed, lived, and reproduced, and why some identities and behaviours are valued and others are not. My path into sociology was carved.

No doubt I reflect on those days with rose tinted glasses, certainly Bourdieu and I had communication problems early on, and I'll admit I wronged him a few times by reading his work as a 'how to' guide for gaining cultural capital (sorry). My family weren't too keen on him at first, no one likes a man that points the ills of society and makes it personal (or maybe that was me, sorry again). But they've come to accept him over the years as a part of me.

Eight years on Bourdieu and I remain tight, I met others along the way that developed my critical eye and some that asked me to turn that eye back on my first love. I fell in love with feminists, rationalists, even the odd psychologist. But always it came back to Bourdieu: the man who left me with as many questions as he gave me answers.

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