

## A Life Lived in Class: The Legacy of Resistance and the Enduring Power of Reproduction

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#### **Abstract**

*I have spent my whole life in 'class', first as a working-class girl and then as a primary school teacher, and later as an academic. My academic career spans over twenty-five years taking the work of Pierre Bourdieu to the limit. Taking Bourdieu's work to the limits is to engage with his research affectively as well as intellectually, to recognise our own social and academic positioning in the same powerful way he recognised and worked with his own autobiography (Bourdieu, 2007). It also requires the deconstruction and reconstruction of his concepts in relation to our own distinct experiences. In this article I attempt to tease out the many different and antagonistic embodiments of the relationship between a habitus and a field, taking myself as a case study. I am going to focus on two fields: the working-class coal-mining community of my childhood and youth, and the educational system.*

*The difficult thing is not to rise in the world, but, while rising, to remain oneself*

*- Jules Michelet (1846)*

Bourdieu's concept of habitus is the theoretical tool he employs to explain how history becomes embodied in the individual in the form of dispositions that remain powerfully linked to economic and cultural background (Reay, 2004). Bourdieu (2007, p. 22) writes in *Sketch for a Self-Analysis* that 'the space of possibilities is realised in individuals exercising an attraction or repulsion that depends on their weight in the field' but weight in the field is always a consequence of an ordinary habitus even for those of us whose habitus has been

transformed. He argues that we cannot understand habitus without analysing the formation of the dispositions associated with the position of origin:

Experience linked to one's social past can and must be mobilised in research, on condition that it has previously been submitted to a rigorous critical examination. The relation to the past which remains present and active in the form of the habitus has to be socio-analysed. (Bourdieu 2007, p. 113)



Figure 1: Working class siblings (1959)

There were many powerful dispositions associated with my position of origin. In the tough coal mining community I grew up in, there were powerful binary discourses of 'them and us, the bosses and the workers, the working classes and the middle classes. My great grandmother, who was still alive when I was a little girl, would spit at the radio every time a member of the royal family or an aristocrat was mentioned. She would spit more if they were actually talking. We were told life was hard, unfair and that our fate was a constant diet of exacting work. My father would always tell his children we were just as good as anyone else, but the subliminal message was of course that we were not. This message was reinforced by

the educational system where, as free school meal children, we had to line up after the “normal” children and have our names read out after everyone else. Such a relationship to the world generates powerful dispositions of opposition, obduracy, defiance, rigidity but also those of solidarity, determination, single-mindedness, and self-reliance; a habitus of recalcitrance (Skeggs, 2004, p. 89). Less palatable but more difficult to own are those dispositions of shame and inferiority. Alongside the opposition and resistance there was a powerful internalisation of the judgments we received from wider society, that we were inferior and those judgments, reinforced by my parents’ feelings that they were never good enough, generated enduring dispositions of poor confidence, self-loathing and low self-esteem.



Figure 2: A working class family (1956)

I am not sure what readers notice in this photo of me and my family from the 1950s, but I see the defiant abject, but shining through the abjection is my mother’s fierce resolve. She had eight children but continued to wear a 23-inch elastic band around her waist into her sixties.

I hated my schooling. I can say that now, but for many years it seemed ungrateful to feel this way. I am one of Bourdieu's oblates: the teacher of humble origins who owes their whole education, culture, training and career to the state education system (Bourdieu, 1990a). I felt I had been lucky, a chosen escapee. Yet many years later when I tried to develop a socio-analysis of my own trajectory, I realised I had fought for every educational advance. My educational experiences were pitiless and harrowing. My year three teacher turned out to be the woman on the posh private estate I had taken three of my younger siblings and three other children for a walk around. When we tried to smell the flowers growing over the wall of her front garden, she called us "scum" and told us to go back to where we had come from. When I walked into her classroom a few months later on my first day at Junior School, there was a mutual shock of recognition. Despite all my earlier efforts, I was once again put on the council estate table. I spent a lot of time that year standing on a chair with a dunce's hat on my head. One boy in my class joked that the "D" must stand for "Diane" because I got to wear it so much. However, to the amazement of the other children I passed the 11 Plus without any practice, or the tutoring nearly all the middle-class children received. One girl said, "there must be a mistake Diane can't have passed", but I had.

Grammar school was both an escape and a torment. I was in the top set, one of only two working class girls, and the judgments were still raining down on me. My math teacher in year 8 accused me of being a liar, a thief and a cheat, and because parents like mine never went into school it was the maternity ward sister who had delivered me, the mother of another girl in my class, who finally came in to defend me and prevent me from being excluded.

I am going to write about just one day of many long days of terror, anxiety and overwhelming fear of failure that epitomizes the resisting habitus – my first day at school! I want you to picture a scene in a small town primary school on the edge of the coalfields in Derbyshire in the mid-1950s. A little girl barely aged five has been gently pushed through the school gate by a harassed mother with baby in pram, a 2-year-old sat on top, and a crying 3-year-old clutching the bar at the side of the pram. The mother rushes off. The little girl is already late, and it is her first day at school. She cautiously makes her way to the front entrance and a kindly secretary ushers her into the reception classroom. Lingering at the door the little girl immediately notices a number of things. First, Roy Machin and Raymond Wilson, two boys from her council estate are sitting at a table laboriously copying the letters on a

sheet of paper. Doris and Edith, also from the estate, are sitting opposite them. Her eyes swivel round the classroom. At the other tables, unknown children are reading. The little girl instantly recognises the very familiar *Janet and John* reading series. She and her mother had been reading the books since she was three and she had recently started to teach her younger sister to read book one.

The teacher looks up, smiles, and asks her name, then walks over to the desk to check the register. "Sit over there," she says pointing to a seat between Roy and Doris.

The little girl hesitates. She wants to read, and she can already write the alphabet on her own. She does not need to copy.

The little girl's father has told her two things about school "Be polite and put your hand up when you ask anything," and "always speak out if things are unfair." She puts her hand up. The teacher frowns, a twinge of irritation fleeting across her face.

"Yes," she enquires.

The little girl says very slowly and solemnly, "Please Miss, I can read. Can I sit at one of the other tables?"

The teacher's frown deepens. "You sit where you are told!"

The little girl reluctantly slides into her chair but refuses to pick up a pencil, stung by the unfairness of it all. She wrestles with herself and fidgets until the teacher comes across and this time raises her voice.

"What on earth is the matter with you child?"

The little girl looks up and says, "But Miss, I can read!"

She is made to stand in the corner with her face to the wall for her insolence, but the next day she is moved to a table of readers.

This is a move away from the children I know, and am familiar with, to a group whose mothers have told them not to sit with children like me. To remain with my friends means to not progress educationally, while to join those who are seen to be educational achievers is to be positioned as the unwelcome outsider.

I want to suggest the dispositions of the resisting habitus were already formed in that five-year-old; that they are evident in the stubborn uncompromising oppositional stance I took to the unfairness of authority. But at the same time the dispositions of solidarity, that were part of the life blood of my coal mining community, were already under threat, powerfully in tension with a hyper-competitive streak that was encouraged by both my parents. That was the first, but far from the last, time I felt a deep sense of relief mingled with fear and an acute sense of disloyalty. Stubborn determination combined with a strong competitive streak became the hallmark of my schooling. Speaking of resistance Bourdieu (in Bourdieu and Waquant, 1992) argues that intellectuals often forget that the dominated are socialised by the very conditions in which they live, and that they are therefore often determined, to varying degrees, to accommodate to their situation, lest the world be totally unliveable for them. Through much of my schooling, and later university experience, the world verged on being unliveable for me.

We cannot make sense of habitus without seeing it in psychological and emotional terms, and in relation to the symbolic violence individuals face. I suggest that those of us who end up working with Bourdieu do not do so by chance and happenstance. His texts emerge out of, and resonate with, the resisting habitus. For Bourdieu (1998, p. 56) 'what is problematic is the fact that the established order is not problematic'. He saw research as not just about the production of knowledge, but as part of the struggle to generate social change through providing different ways of seeing the social world:

Scientific explanation should teach the researcher where his liberties are really situated and resolutely to refuse the infinitesimal acts of cowardice and laxness which leave the power of social necessity intact, to fight in himself and in others the opportunist indifference or conformist ennui which allows the social milieu to impose the slippery slope of resigned compliance and submissive complicity. (Bourdieu, 1998, pp. 4-5)

However, for me to conform to the values and requirements of the status quo would not be opportunism but defeatism. Resigned compliance and submissive complicity when you are at the bottom of the social hierarchy is to accept your own exploitation and oppression.

Yet, I argue that even in early childhood there were strongly ingrained dispositions of fatalism in my habitus: not fatalism in the traditional sense of despair and passivity, but rather that I had no choice. I was caught up in a family project of social mobility that had been decided for me before I was born.

Bourdieu is not just an academic whose work personifies a tension between resistance and reproduction, there is a parallel tension between agency and structure. We socially mobile, especially those like me who supposedly personify a “rags to riches” trajectory, represent the agentic among the working classes, but I argue that my propulsion was a strange sort of agency little to do with free will and choice. I *had* to be socially mobile. There was a long-standing historical rage in my family about the way the world was and still is.

My great grandfather went to prison in the great depression of the 1930s for punching and knocking-out one of the two police constables who tried to caution him for poaching a rabbit. He spent 9 months in Derby jail. My great grandmother was arrested for breaking the first newly installed plate glass window in the town my family lived in. It belonged to an alderman and richest man in the town. She told the magistrate he deserved it for showing off. My father once walked out of his colliery in protest at the safety conditions. His mates at work used to joke he had gone on strike on his own.

I strongly believe my disposition to resist, to refuse to compromise or comply are rooted in an historical family habitus characterised by righteous indignation and defiance, engrained not only in my parents’ generation but generations before. My family history haunts me, but its effects are not ephemeral and shadowy. They are powerfully tangible.

I have written extensively of habitus-as-history and Bourdieu asserts that:

In each of us, in varying proportions, there is part of yesterday’s man; it is yesterday’s man who inevitably predominates in us, since the present amounts to little compared with the long past in the course of which we were formed.

(Bourdieu, 2000, pp. 78–79)

One of Bourdieu’s earliest articles is called *The Dead Seize the Living*. Thumping policemen, breaking the windows of capitalists, organising a one-man strike, are part of a family history of opposition to the way things are that has had a searing impact on the way I

am. Such actions are the outward expression of a habitus of recalcitrance. As Skeggs (2004, p. 89) argues:

We also need to be able to understand the habitus of recalcitrance, of non-belonging, of no-caring, those who refuse to make a virtue out of necessity, the 'f\*\*\* off and 'so what' of utterances, the radical emptiness of the habitus, one that does not want to play the dominant symbolic game and accrue any value?

That legacy of recalcitrance is sedimented in my bones, my physiology, in constant war with a hyper-competitive conforming self. The definition of the recalcitrant is one who has an obstinately uncooperative attitude towards authority or discipline, and although I far too often comply and compromise, there are key points when a stubborn refusal and defiance takes over and I find myself, often against my own intellectual "best judgment", resisting.

Bourdieu (1990b: 90) argues that the subject is not the instantaneous ego of a sort of singular cogito, but the individual trace of an entire collective history, and I would argue that the traces of a collective history are evident throughout my life. Bourdieu (2007, p. 110) writes of having to practice 'a kind of semi-controlled schizophrenia' and I argue that many of those of us from working class backgrounds who become academics are engaged in the constant 'conciliation of contraries' that generates Bourdieu's cleft habitus. (Bourdieu, 1999). Habitus is fundamentally about the integration or the lack of integration of the disparate experiences that make up a biography (Bourdieu, 1984) but it is when there is a lack of integration that Bourdieu writes about the cleft habitus.



Figure 3: First year at University (1968)

My Grammar school headteacher told me: “Girls like you do not go to university.” She was right. I stubbornly persisted only to arrive at my Russell Group institution to find there were no “girls like me.” If they did exist, they were far more adept at assimilation. Social class is deeply inscribed on the body. My working-class habitus was evident in a range of both crude and subtle embodied differences. It soon became clear that I had mastered no arts of assimilation. At the freshers’ ball a public-school boy egged on by his friends came and said: “Haven’t I seen you in Woolworths?” I smiled until he went on to ask how I had managed to gatecrash the dance. He had thought I worked in Woolworths.

Like my father before me, I staged two solitary protests in my first year at university. The first when our sociology lecturer told us coal miners keep their coal in the bath. I stood up yelled “rubbish!” then walked out. My resulting embarrassment meant I did not go back for three weeks.

After coming top in my first-year examinations I ended up doing a joint honours degree in Politics and Economics. I was both the only female and the only student from a working-class background on the course. I was stalked by the Sociology Lecturer, a married man with children. When I turned to my economics tutor for help, he suggested we spend the weekend away in his country cottage to 'work things out'. He too was a married man with a pregnant wife. Confronted with a field where I was seen to have little intellectual value, but rather an excessive physicality that was attracting unwanted attention, I resorted to a tactic that is common among high achieving young women with low self-esteem. Faced with a dehumanising objectification, I tried to lose my body. Habitus is the social world internalized in the body and that social world was making me sick. I became ill, first with anorexia, then bulimia, and left university with a second-class degree and a strong sense of being bruised and battered by the whole experience.

This is the reference I left university with. It refers to my appearance more than my intellect and focuses on personality traits. In fact, when it does mention intelligence it refers to it as innate!

*I have known Miss Reay for 2 and a half years, nearly one year of which as her tutor, and can vouch for her impeccable character and personality. She is a very personable and agreeable girl, always sensible and extremely well presented. She is a conscientious and reliable person with a strong dose of innate intelligence and practical ability. Furthermore, Miss Reay possesses a co-operative and sensible disposition, while her honesty and integrity are beyond question.*

When I read it, I felt simultaneously upset and betrayed, but I was also struck by a powerful sense of recognition. I did not challenge it because on one level I felt this man had seen the real as opposed to the fabricated me: the shop girl rather than the aspiring academic. So, I gave up on academia, an academic career, and trying to be middle class, and did not go back for twenty years.

Bourdieu, as many feminists have pointed out (Skeggs and Adkins, 2004), is not very good on gender. So far, I have spoken of the recalcitrant habitus wholly in class terms, but the academy is a field defined by male as well as upper class power: a space where racism of

intelligence is compounded by the misogyny of intelligence. But while my coal mining community had at least provided me with resources to challenge and fight the former, there were no generative dispositions to combat the latter. I tried desperately to transform my body.

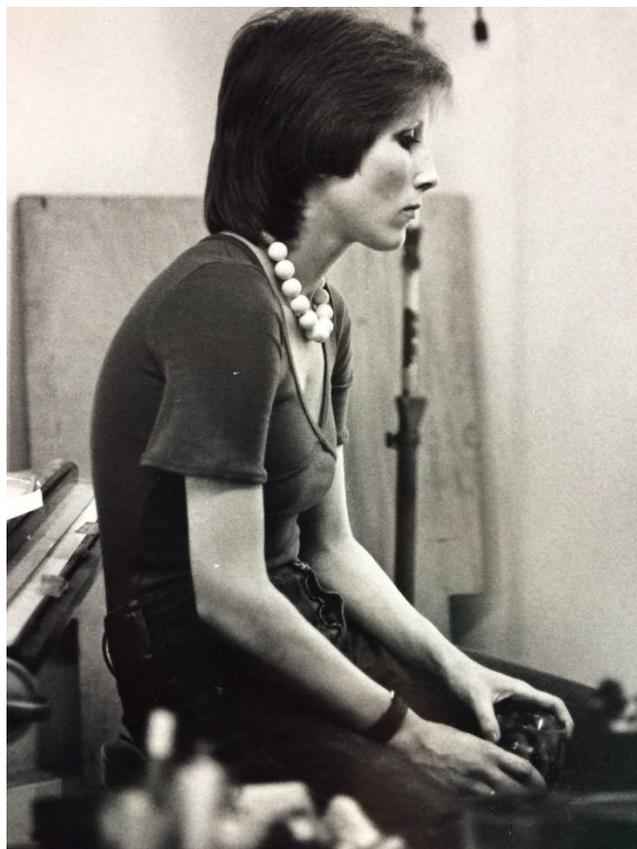


Figure 4: Last Year at University 1970

Although we can change our outward appearance, our classed bodily and mental dispositions are not so easy to refashion. Writing about academia, Bourdieu (1990a) asserts that to understand the academic field is first to understand the field with which and against which one has been formed. However, working-class men experience a very different academy to working class women, one that similarly undervalues them but rarely reduces them to sexual objects.

In order to deal with the social determinations and existential contingencies that compose the self, you first need to understand them. This has been an attempt to understand the impact of class on my developing subjectivity as a child and young woman through Bourdieu's conceptual lens, and in particular, his concept of habitus. Bourdieu (in Bourdieu

and Wacquant 1992, p. 82) acknowledges the existence of everyday forms of resistance among dominated groups, but he largely dismissed such resistance as ineffective 'spontaneist populism'. Everyday resistance, Bourdieu (in Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992) argues, often materialises in counter-cultural expressions that only further the marginalisation of an already marginalised group. My life has been a complex amalgam of painful, but also at times joyous, myriad adaptations, responses, reactions and resistances to the way the world is. It has been an almost constant struggle to make the world a different place.

The dominated for Bourdieu (in Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992) are faced with two equally bad choices: cooptation or resistance-cum-further exclusion. The problem with much resistance is that it is creative, subversive and 'going nowhere'. All those everyday acts of resistance involve a lot of energy, but ultimately reconstitute reproduction. My resistances over a period of 65 years have transformed my own life but they have made no difference at all to the status quo.

We cannot transcend the effects of a field by pulling ourselves up by our own bootstraps. There is a slim and slippery line between the resistant and the resisting habitus, and similarly between a resisting and a reproductive habitus. Recalcitrance may be sedimented in your very bones but all the opposition and defiance you can muster is not sufficient on its own to change the status quo. As Robbins (2006, p. 347) points out, Bourdieu's worldview turns Rousseau's contention on its head: 'It is not that we are born free but are everywhere in chains. On the contrary, we are born in chains and constantly strive to construct the functional fiction that we are free'. That personifies us, the working classes who become socially mobile: born in chains we spend a lifetime struggling to construct the fiction that we are free. I think that is one of the most important lessons to be learnt from my life, drawing again on Bourdieu's words: 'freedom is not given: It is something you conquer collectively' (Bourdieu 1990b, p. 15), and social mobility under neoliberal capitalism is never a collective act. It is isolating, alienating, habitus as the often-uncontrolled return of the repressed.

As Bourdieu (in Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, p. 24) states, 'resistance can be alienating, and submission can be liberating'. The recalcitrant habitus can have both self-defeating and transformative consequences, as I have tried to illustrate through my own experiences. The limits to change are central to the recalcitrant habitus, the refusal of others' power is at its

heart but, as I found out all too often, that refusal is undermined by power imbalances that can be challenged but rarely transcended.

For too much of my life other people's power has worked to silence me. Academic success in my fifties finally afforded me a voice that might be heard. However, the desire to be recognised and respected, combined with an enduring sense that I was not authorised to speak meant that even as a Cambridge Professor I frequently felt I was not entitled to my own words, my own views, that they lacked legitimation and would work to accentuate the differences between myself and others in the academic field. It is only after retirement, as I approach my seventies, that I finally feel able to begin thinking in my own words (Reay, 2017). There is a terrible consequence in this silencing of those of us growing up working class. It is no longer terrible for me, but for the people I left behind, the still-working classes. I may have found a voice but no one with the power and resources to effect change is listening to it.

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