

**Bourdieu, P. (2023). *Politics and Sociology*.
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Politics and Sociology brings together a series of lectures delivered by Pierre Bourdieu at the Collège de France between 17 April and 19 June 1986. Representing the fifth iteration of his lecture series on general sociology, the work addresses a number of themes central to Bourdieu's long-standing project of defending sociology as an intellectually rigorous discipline. In these lectures, Bourdieu reiterates that social life unfolds across fields such as politics, education, media and the state, all structured by the unequal distribution of economic, cultural and social capital. While much of the material in the volume restates arguments from Bourdieu's earlier works (see, for example, Bourdieu, 1984a, 1984b, 1990, 1991), *Politics and Sociology* pays particular attention to *symbolic capital*, which he conceptualises as the specific weapon deployed at the site of a struggle for a legitimate vision of the world. From this perspective, one task of sociology, for Bourdieu, is to reveal and contest the mechanisms through which domination, or rather the imposition of particular vision(s) of the world, is legitimised and naturalised.

The volume is organised into eight chapters, corresponding to eight lecture sessions given under different titles. Each lecture allowed Bourdieu to clarify further his conceptual triad of capital, field and habitus. In the opening lecture, Bourdieu distinguishes between 'field' as a *field of forces* (a physicalist structured space) and 'field' as a *field of struggle* (constituted by social agents). The former, Bourdieu contends, becomes a field of struggle when composed of social agents who perceive it as a site of conflict. Agents enter various fields with their habitus, which he describes as that which mobilises history at any given moment. Drawing on the Husserlian distinction between protention and projection (see Husserl, 1964, pp. 57–77), Bourdieu argues that habitus is not just the past incorporated in the bodies of social agents; it also consists of the capacity that allows agents to grasp situations practically and to orient themselves towards future possibilities. It is through these anticipations that the habitus changes, albeit always within historically and structurally bounded limits (pp. 66–67).

In *Politics and Sociology*, Bourdieu accords the habitus a greater degree of agency than in some of his earlier works; this move comes at a theoretical cost, however, as he finds himself caught up in the perennial difficulty of sustaining a conception of agency that is neither voluntarist nor wholly determined by structure. At such instances in the lecture(s), rather than taking the discussions to their logical conclusion, Bourdieu swiftly shifts to another theme (see pp. 42, 75, 128, 174, 192); and when he does descend the rabbit hole, the content delivered becomes increasingly dense and impenetrable (see, for example, pp. 202–210). This situation is not incidental, for throughout his career, Bourdieu sought to overcome what he regarded as the false antinomies of sociological theory: structure versus agency, objectivism versus subjectivism, theoretical

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versus practical knowledge (see Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. xi). Despite Bourdieu's intention in these lecture series to show that habitus has agency more than his detractors would allege, the argumentative weight of the lecture content, which falls decisively on demonstrating how political action and representation are socially conditioned and how institutions stabilise dominant visions of the social world, re-emphasises the highly structured nature of what one perceives as agentic in the habitus (see Evens, 1999; King, 2000). Re-echoing Karl Marx's well-known dictum,¹ Bourdieu contends that "agents do exercise choices, but only if we bear in mind the fact that they do not choose the grounds for those choices at every moment" (p. 243).

Notwithstanding these issues, the substance of *Politics and Sociology* is intellectually engaging. In advancing his sociological arguments, Bourdieu draws on an unusually wide range of intellectual traditions, spanning philosophical ideas and theories, anthropological findings, musings from literature and linguistics, occasional references to the physical sciences, and etymological analyses, particularly of terms with Latin origins. This breadth not only attests to the depth of Bourdieu's knowledge but also illustrates his commitment to interdisciplinarity as an effective pedagogical approach. At several points, though, he exercises epistemic modesty by explicitly letting his listeners know the limits of his expertise in the fields he invokes or attempts to venture into (see, for example, pp. 15, 33, 39). Elsewhere, he concedes that aspects of his argument may appear contradictory, defending these tensions by suggesting that they reflect the contradictions of his own life trajectory, from a modest provincial Béarnese background to the upper echelons of French academic life (see Bourdieu, 2007). These sorts of engagements frequently shift the tone of the text between scholarly exposition and polemical intervention, creating a distinct reading experience and, for some readers, can make the volume feel uneven as a unified work.

A central strength of the collection lies in its sustained commitment to reflexive sociology. Bourdieu repeatedly insists that sociologists must direct their analytic gaze towards their own positions within academic fields, funding regimes and hierarchies of prestige. Knowledge production, he argues, is a site of struggle shaped by competition over prestige, publication and authority. This reflexive stance guards against the illusion of scholarly neutrality, inviting researchers to recognise how their categories, methods and theoretical commitments are socially conditioned. However, as critics have noted, reflexivity has its limits. Knafo (2016), for instance, contends that Bourdieu (like many proponents of reflexive sociology) often overestimates his capacity to fully apprehend his own epistemic position. Indeed, in asserting that sociology is uniquely equipped to reveal domination concealed by common sense, Bourdieu implicitly advances a hierarchical epistemology that privileges sociological knowledge. In doing so, he does not sufficiently subject this claim to reflexive scrutiny, particularly the social conditions that informed the production of such an assertion, making it plausible and legitimate. From a Foucauldian perspective, such epistemic privileging risks reproducing precisely the forms of domination that sociology seeks to critique, insofar as it normalises particular regimes of truth and marginalises alternative ways of knowing (see Foucault, 1980, 1982).

Overall, *Politics and Sociology* consolidates Bourdieu's enduring contribution to political sociology: a relational, reflexive and power-sensitive analysis of how domination is reproduced and contested in modern societies. Granted that the work was significantly improved by editors who sought to balance fidelity to the original lectures with readability, the volume nevertheless demands substantial conceptual effort from readers and leaves some questions of agency and transformation underdeveloped. Nonetheless, it is a

¹ "Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past" (Marx, 1943, p. 23).

valuable resource for scholars seeking to understand the subtle mechanisms through which politics operates beyond formal institutions. For sociologists in Aotearoa New Zealand, the collection offers both analytical tools and intellectual provocation, encouraging deeper engagement with the symbolic dimensions of power, the politics of knowledge production, and the ongoing challenge of linking sociological critique to democratic possibility. The volume is also well-suited for postgraduate students taking courses in political sociology, social theory and critical policy studies.

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