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Michael A. McCarthy

*Marquette University*, [michael.mccarthy@marquette.edu](mailto:michael.mccarthy@marquette.edu)

Josh Seim

*Boston College*

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# Classes Without Labor: Three Critiques of Bourdieu

Josh Seim

Boston College, Boston, MA, USA

Michael A. McCarthy

Marquette University, Milwaukee, WI, USA

## Abstract

This article offers three interrelated critiques of Bourdieusian class analysis. First, Bourdieu replaces classes on paper with capitals on paper. He offers a false break from Marx in an effort to make capital more 'relational' via a theory of social space, but in doing so he neglects capital's fundamental relation to labor. Second, Bourdieu offers a theory of domination without exploitation. Bourdieu's classes live against one another, but it remains unclear how some classes might also live off of others. Third, and as a consequence of the first two missteps, he emphasizes position over production. Bourdieu typically sees 'production' as a form of 'position-taking' and as something best examined toward the top of social hierarchies. By largely ignoring labor and exploitation, he generates a theory of positions at the expense of a theory of production.

## Introduction

By at least one account, Pierre Bourdieu is the most cited sociologist of the 21st century (Korom, 2020).<sup>1</sup> Books have been written about his influence (Burawoy, 2019; Swartz, 1998), collective volumes have been dedicated to his ideas (Calhoun et al., 1993; Medvetz and Sallaz, 2018), and international conferences have been organized in his image (Bourdieu, Work, and Inequalities Conference in Paris, 2022). Bourdieu's concepts of field, capital, habitus, and symbolic power have been used—sometimes together but frequently in isolation—to analyze just about every major sociological topic imaginable: culture (Lizardo, 2011), education (James, 2015), punishment (Wacquant, 2009), family (Lareau, 2011), migration (Erel, 2010), health care (Shim, 2010), neighborhoods (Cornelissen, 2022), labor (Sallaz, 2010), and more.

Class inequality, however, remains a central theme in Bourdieusian sociology. Families and schools help reproduce the class order through an uneven transmission of cultural capital (Davies and Rizk, 2018; Lareau, 2011). Taste, a seemingly asocial sensation that orients relational consumption, is forged and ordered through a class hierarchy (Doane, 2009; Thurnell-Read, 2018). Habitus, a durable system of dispositions, structures one's feel and navigation for classed spaces (Fraser, 2013; Hartmann, 2000). Class is not everything in Bourdieusian sociology, but it does play a central role.

Indeed, the dissemination of Bourdieu's concepts has advanced a particular theorization of class, one insisting that capital comes in multiple species, that habitus is a primary vector for structuring class-based practices, and that fields differentiate class positions not just vertically but also horizontally. Whether Bourdieu anticipated it or not, his theorization of class relations, by virtue of being firmly attached to his core concepts, has been disseminated as well.

This article challenges Bourdieusian class analysis primarily on the grounds that it neglects relations of production and the extraction of value from labor effort, or exploitation. To that end, we focus heavily, but not exclusively, on Bourdieu's lectures published in *Practical Reason* (Bourdieu, 1998). These were all initially delivered after the publications of *Distinction* (Bourdieu, 1984), *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Bourdieu, 1977), and 'The Forms of Capital' (Bourdieu, 1986). In many ways, they are lectures of self-defense, as they seek to clarify and justify his particular position-takings on a range of sociological topics. With respect to Bourdieu's particular brand of class analysis, the *Practical Reason* lectures detail his approach across studies of taste, education, state, and more.

We offer three interrelated critiques. First, Bourdieu replaces classes on paper with capitals on paper. He offers a false break from Marx in an effort to make capital more 'relational' via a theory of social space, but in doing so he tends to neglect capital's fundamental relation to labor. Second, Bourdieu offers a theory of domination without exploitation. All of his classes seem to *live against* one another, but it remains unclear how some classes might *live off* of others. Third, and as a consequence of the first two missteps, he emphasizes position over production. He typically sees 'production' as a form of 'position-taking' and as something best examined toward the top of social hierarchies. By largely ignoring labor and exploitation, he generates a theory of positions *at the expense* of a theory of production. After carefully constructing and defending our critiques, we close with some reflections on what they might mean for sociological class analysis more generally.

## Critique 1: Bourdieu Replaces Classes on Paper With Capitals on Paper

*Practical Reason* opens with a lecture Bourdieu delivered in Tokyo in 1989. Here, he rails against ‘substantialist’ analyses—those rooted in anti-relational, essentialist, and often commonsensical readings of individuals or groups—before targeting Marx and Marxism. According to Bourdieu, Marx ‘more than any other theoretician exerted the *theory effect*’ and rendered classes ‘existing only *on paper*’ (Bourdieu, 1998: 10–11, emphasis in original). Bourdieu insists that classes in a Marxian sense only become ‘real’ when they are ‘mobilized’, and this happens as ‘a result of the *struggle of classifications*, which is a properly symbolic (and political) struggle to impose a vision of the social world’ (Bourdieu, 1998: 11, emphasis in original). In other words, class struggle is only made possible through a classification struggle, and this requires above all else a relational theory of symbolic power (see also Bourdieu, 1986). Marxist class analysis supposedly ignores such things. For Bourdieu at least, Marxism risks offering ‘substantialist’ interpretations of class by uncritically accepting its elaborations on paper.

In departing from Marx, Bourdieu claims to offer an alternative that hinges on the primacy of ‘social space’, as an alternative to the primacy of class structure found in Marxism. He insists,

Social classes do not exist (even if political work, armed with Marx’s theory, had in some cases contributed to making them at least exist through instances of mobilization and proxies). What exists is a social space, a space of differences, in which classes exist in some sense in a state of virtuality, not as something given but as *something to be done*. (Bourdieu, 1998: 12 [emphasis in original])<sup>2</sup>

Most abstractly, social space is realized through the relation between positions, dispositions, and position-takings (Bourdieu, 1998: 6). The trademark concepts of field, capital, and habitus help us articulate these relations. A field is a subset of objective positions with a distinct logic. Habitus is a system of dispositions that, in interaction with objective structures, shapes position-taking in the form of practices (see also Heilbron and Steinmetz, 2018). Capital, however, is especially important for Bourdieu’s formulation of social space. He argues that in the ‘most advanced societies’ social space is primarily ordered by the distribution of economic capital and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1998: 6). This distribution differentiates positions—and thus also dispositions and position-takings—according to two basic relationalities: volume and composition. Where capital volume accounts for a relation between high and low, capital composition—or what Bourdieu sometimes calls ‘structure’—accounts for a ratio or ‘relative weight’ of economic and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1998: 6–7).

Consider the examples offered in his lecture. Bourdieu (1998: 7) sketches some oppositions between ‘industrial employers’, ‘university professors’, and ‘unskilled workers’. These are analytical distinctions that Bourdieu argues are justified by the observed volume and composition of capital. Industrial employers and university professors have high volumes of capital relative to unskilled workers, and this constitutes an obvious vertical opposition. However, the industrial employers and university professors (at least in France and Bourdieu also suspects in Japan) are horizontally opposed in terms of capital composition, with the former having a higher ratio of economic capital and the latter having a higher ratio of cultural capital. More toward the middle of the social hierarchy, we can see a parallel

horizontalities between 'small merchants' who have a higher composition of economic capital and 'primary school teachers' who have a higher composition of cultural capital. Taken together, this suggests that capital volume and composition structure the space of positions (fields), which shapes and is shaped by the space of dispositions (habitus) and position-takings (practices).

Bourdieu develops a critical social theory that seeks to abandon 'substantialist' notions of class along with the assumptions that classes automatically exist beyond their articulations by academics, politicians, and others with symbolic power. This is a noble effort, and we too agree that 'classes on paper' are problematic because they are substantialist. It is hard, however, to accept the new assumptions that creep in as a result of Bourdieu's intervention.

It is first worth noting that Bourdieu offers a false break from Marx. He rejects 'class in Marx's sense, that is a group which is mobilized for common purposes, and especially against another class' (Bourdieu, 1998: 11, emphasis in original). This may be a reasonable critique of some particular iterations of Marxist class analysis. For instance, one could see this as a decent critique of Kautsky's (1909) assumption that proletarianization would homogenize political interest among the working class. This is not, however, a fair critique of Marx. At minimum, Bourdieu conflates classes-in-themselves (class structure) and classes-for-themselves (class formation). While that dichotomy has long been a source of irritation even within Marxism (e.g. Poulantzas, 2018 [1974]), Bourdieu is wrong to reduce Marxian class analysis to theories of mobilization.

As Marx (1978 [1847]: 218) famously wrote about the English proletariat,

Economic conditions first transformed the mass of the people of the country into workers. The combination of capital has created for this mass a common situation, common interests. This mass is thus already a class as against capital, but not yet for itself. In the struggle, of which we have noted only a few phases, this mass becomes united, and constitutes itself as a class for itself. The interests it defends become class interests. But the struggle of class against class is a political struggle.

Marx is quite clear that what Bourdieu calls 'mobilization' is *not* a necessary condition of class. Mobilization, we might say, is but 'something to be done' (Bourdieu, 1998: 12, emphasis in original). It is possible, and perhaps likely, that position-taking is linked to both position and disposition, but this is never fully assured. We might say that class 'antagonisms' may be automatic for Marx—similar to the vertical and horizontal 'oppositions' detailed by Bourdieu—but he is clear that antagonisms in structural interests alone do not overdetermine mobilization. Commonality in 'interest' does not guarantee it either. That, like antagonism, is but a general effect of structural circumstance. Similar to Bourdieu, Marx suggests that class mobilization occurs most consequentially in a political arena. Bourdieu may do more than Marx to emphasize the relative autonomy of that arena (or field) and he certainly does more to emphasize symbolic power, but his reduction of Marx's notion of class to a mobilized group is not justifiable.

Indeed, Marx's construction of classes is not unlike Bourdieu's construction of capitals. They are assumed to represent something objectively real. Like Marx's classes, Bourdieu's capitals are seen as part of an 'invisible reality' to be studied relationally (Bourdieu, 1998: 3, 10). He identifies different

‘species’ of capital and he assumes, like any serious taxonomizer, that these typify real ‘*principles of differentiation*’ (Bourdieu, 1998: 6, emphasis in original).

So, why should we accept Bourdieu’s capitals as any more real than Marx’s classes? If we are to conclude that Marx constructs classes on paper, then is it not fair to say Bourdieu does the same for capitals? Are not both theorists essentially constructing *and* (ideally) discovering something that they argue is basically real?

If we take seriously Bourdieu’s (1998: 3) premise that ‘the real is relational’, it is certainly hard to accept that capitals are objectively realer than classes. Bourdieu’s capitals are arguably less relational, and thus more substantialist, than Marx’s classes. Even if we accept that he introduces a relationality of capital composition, we should not forget that he tends to strip away the most important relationality of Marx’s version of capital: its relation to labor.

To be fair, ‘The Forms of Capital’ (Bourdieu, 1986) mentions this relation, but only in a fleeting way. Echoing Marx, Bourdieu (1986: 241) states, ‘Capital is accumulated labor’. He acknowledges that capital is ‘materialized’ or ‘incorporated’ and that this requires a purposeful expenditure of energy (Bourdieu, 1986: 241). However, labor—as both a possibility (i.e. labor power) and a practice (i.e. labor process)—falls out of view as Bourdieu focuses on the internal relations of capital forms and their external relations to habitus and field.

This is not to say that labor power or the labor process is *totally* absent in Bourdieu’s writing. For example, careful readers can find these concepts or ones like them in *Algeria 1960* (Bourdieu, 1979). While this book explicitly amends Weber’s ‘spirit of capitalism’ with a theory of disposition and implicitly recasts Durkheim’s ‘anomie’ with a theory of position-disposition mismatch, it also briefly considers how labor power is activated through new labor processes embedded in colonial relations (Bourdieu, 1979: 10). However, this book, like the ‘Forms of Capital’ essay, ultimately marginalizes labor relative to a general theory of habitus and other concerns. It is a book that examines ‘economic practices of daily life’ which most obviously include, according to Bourdieu, not labor but ‘purchases, saving, and credit’ (Bourdieu, 1979: vii). More importantly, *Algeria 1960* is a book that is characteristically Bourdieusian in its general inability (or refusal) to theorize the *relation* between labor and capital(s).

If Marx constructs a social space made primarily of workers, Bourdieu constructs a social space made primarily of capitalists. Almost everyone is a sort of capitalist according to Bourdieu. This is true not only for the ‘industrial employers’ and ‘small merchants’, but also the ‘university professors’, ‘primary school teachers’, and ‘unskilled workers’. All bear some volume and some composition of capital, and all at some level make investments, convert resources, play games, and so on. Bourdieu is quick to distinguish this vision from classical and neoliberal economic theory via a theory of habitus, ‘illusio’, and more. And while this is a fair distinction overall, it is remarkable that like so many economists he produces a framework that generally mystifies the significance of work. Yet, as we will argue, the dynamics of production undergird precisely what is so significant about Bourdieu’s capitals.

Bourdieu may be right to critique ‘classes on paper’, but he is wrong to build this on a narrow reading of Marx and Marxism, and his solution of ‘social space’ generates an analogous error we title ‘capitals on paper’. The real problem here is that in trying to make capital more ‘relational’, Bourdieu tends to

neglect its fundamental relation to labor. As we argue in the next section, this limits his ability to see another basic relation of classed societies: exploitation.

## Critique 2: Bourdieu Theorizes Domination Without Exploitation

Neglecting labor is one problem; ignoring exploitation is another. Exploitation, and *labor exploitation* in particular, is arguably a core relational feature of class, but Bourdieu only focuses on domination. By never offering a substantial theory of exploitation, he oversimplifies class relations as merely differentials in access to material and symbolic resources. We relearn something commonsensical from Bourdieu: the upper class is situated above the middle class, which is situated above the working class. Classes for Bourdieu *live against* one another. And while he gives us some sense of how this hierarchy operates and even reproduces, he gives us few insights into why it exists to begin with. The absence of any meaningful account of exploitation is core to this problem.

But what exactly is exploitation and why does neglecting it matter so much when theorizing class? For Marx (1978 [1849]: 209), exploitation specifically refers to the appropriation of surplus labor, that being the value added by workers above the necessary cost of their labor power. However, we need not get lost in debates of 'value'. The more important point is that class exploitation involves, as Wright (2002: 832) puts it, an 'extraction of labor effort'. It is a motivation, opportunity, and effect of class domination. Exploitation is what allows some classes to *live off* of others.

This is not to say that there is no place within class analysis for a theory of domination as a distinct phenomenon. Prioritizing a concern of exploitation also does not mean class domination cannot be a key means of social differentiation. Wright (2000: 10), for instance, defines domination as one actor benefiting from the deprivations of another by virtue of the latter's exclusion from certain resources. Managers may dominate those that work under them by controlling the labor process, but that control may not always guarantee a unilateral interest in the extraction of labor effort. Certain forms of workplace sexual harassment, for example, may be structured by class domination but contradict class exploitation.

With respect to Bourdieu, Desan (2013: 338 fn7) shows how his vision of domination is similar to Weber's (1978 [1922]) theory of social closure and Tilly's (1998) theory of opportunity hoarding. Domination, for Bourdieu, is principally a means of excluding others from advantages. His contribution in many ways is to show how this is mystified as natural via 'taste' and other principles of distinction (Bourdieu, 1984). But treating class as primarily (if not solely) a naturalized hierarchy of exclusion fails to reveal why class differentiation emerges in the first place. As Desan (2013: 328) notes,

One might wonder what determines the distribution of effective capitals in the social space. Answering this question requires a concept of class that goes beyond simply describing a given state of the distribution of efficient resources. While the quantitative distribution of resources has determinate effects, if class as a concept is to be a principle of historical explanation, it must also be grasped in its positive historical determinations, and not just relationally as difference. Moreover, by redefining class broadly as a particular distribution of all forms of capital effective within a social space, Bourdieu loses any theoretical traction for

accounting for exploitation as a mode of power distinct from domination or exclusion.

Capital, for Bourdieu, is a 'multi-dimensional' power resource where the dimensions are set across a range of relatively autonomous fields. But as Desan (2013: 332) shows, by reducing class to this level of analysis, Bourdieu obscures the relations of exploitation (see also Flemmen, 2013). The economic field, where we should find the most basic contestations over 'economic capital', is, like any other Bourdieusian field of practice, rendered as a realm of position-taking where domination is structured almost entirely by forces of exclusion. But if class domination in the Bourdieusian perspective is primarily a matter of putting to service one's capital—economic, cultural, or otherwise—what explains the underlying allocation of capital that this process justifies?

Indeed, Bourdieu not only struggles to answer this question, he almost seems intent on dismissing it as irrelevant or misguided. Only a few months before his trip to Tokyo, he was in the United States delivering a lecture at the University of Wisconsin. There, he offered the following definition,

Domination is not the direct and simple action exercised by a set of agents ('the dominant class') invested with powers of coercion. Rather, it is the indirect effect of a complex set of actions engendered within the network of intersecting constraints which each of the dominants, thus dominated by the structure of the field through which domination is exerted, endures on behalf of all the others. (Bourdieu, 1998: 34)

Domination, according to this framing, is but the 'indirect effect' of power relations, namely the relations among those with relatively high volumes but oppositional compositions of capital. Agents, as he insists earlier in the same lecture, may be able to dominate others in a field, but doing so is never a direct or simple action. Instead, domination is exerted through complex spaces of positions and position-takings that almost always appear natural via dispositions. For Bourdieu, even the 'dominants' are dominated by these conditions. Indeed, *domination hangs everywhere in social space*.<sup>3</sup> It may not have universal effects, but it seems to have a universal reach. Regardless, the result is the same: a theory of domination sans exploitation. *Why* domination happens beyond Bourdieu's law-like principles of differentiation remains a mystery.

If the above definition expands a 'positional' view that breaks from the dominant-dominated dyad, the next—which Bourdieu offered in an Amsterdam-based lecture in 1991—deepens a 'dispositional' view of the same concept,

The social world is riddled with *calls to order* that function as such only for those who are predisposed to heeding them as they *awaken* deeply buried corporeal dispositions, outside the channels of consciousness and calculation. It is this doxic submission of the dominated to the structures of a social order of which their mental structures are the product that Marxism cannot understand insofar as it remains trapped in the intellectualist tradition of the philosophies of consciousness. (Bourdieu, 1998: 54–55, emphasis in original)



While Bourdieu again targets Marx, it is also important to highlight that his break is also from Weber's definition of domination as the probability of obedience. Later in the same lecture, Bourdieu (1998: 55–56) says, the 'recognition of legitimacy is not, as Weber believed, a free act of clear conscience'. He is likely referring to Weber's (1978 [1922]: 212) argument that 'every genuine form of domination implies a minimum of voluntary compliance, that is, an *interest* (based on ulterior motives or genuine acceptance) in obedience' (emphasis in original). Bourdieu sees submission, which agents apparently do less to others and more to structures, as largely unconscious and corporeal. It seems then that *domination also hangs somewhere in the body*. The dominated habitus is generally oriented by a 'doxa', which Bourdieu (1998: 57) later defines in the same lecture as 'the point of view of the dominant, which presents and imposes itself as a universal point of view'. Such a framing of domination stresses the significance of symbolic power, that being the power to name and frame the social world and to make 'people see and believe' (Bourdieu, 1991: 170).

When taken together, the positional and dispositional dimensions identified by Bourdieu compose seemingly naturalized hierarchies of domination like the one he details in *Distinction* (Bourdieu, 1984). That study examines taste, a seemingly instinctual sensation and ordering of preference, as it varies across the 'working class', 'middle class', and 'upper class'. Everyone to an extent is dominated, even the upper class. However, the indirect effects of domination intensify toward the bottom of the hierarchy. Many of these effects can be located within the habitus, which structures an agent's dispositions and confirm domination as a largely unconscious and corporeal experience of oppositions.

It is nonetheless worth noting that at some points Bourdieu gets close to theorizing exploitation. Consider, for example, the following account of 'dispossession' in *Distinction*:

Dispossession is never more totally misrecognized, and therefore tacitly recognized, then when, with the progress of automation, economic dispossession is combined with the cultural dispossession which provides the best apparent justification for economic dispossession. Lacking the internalized cultural capital which is the pre-condition for correct appropriation (according to the legitimate definition) of the cultural capital objectified in technical objects, ordinary workers are dominated by the machines and instruments which they serve rather than use, and by those who possess the legitimate, i.e., theoretical means of dominating them. (Bourdieu, 1984: 386–387)

Class domination enables a double exclusion from both economic and cultural capital. However, Bourdieu's account of dispossession substitutes, or at least approximates, a theory of exploitation. He suggests economic dispossession occurs in part through automation, through what might be an increased separation of workers not just from the products but also the instruments of their labor. Bourdieu clearly argues 'economic dispossession' is mystified—or rather misrecognized—when it is coupled with 'cultural dispossession'. Those with certain 'internalized cultural capital' (i.e. specific technical knowledge) are able to dominate the particular technical objects that dominate workers, in what *may* presumably involve an extraction of labor effort.

However, working such a light theory of exploitation into Bourdieu's class analysis, just like working in a light theory of labor, requires quite a bit of analytical gymnastics. It certainly requires an elevation of some fairly marginal points made in Bourdieu's theorizations as well as some pretty wide stretching of his ideas. If nothing else, it is remarkable how difficult it is to identify anything closely resembling exploitation in Bourdieu's writing, especially as it relates to the exploitation of labor. The fact remains that, at least for Bourdieu, domination, and specifically its indirect and embodied effects, exists as something far more important than exploitation or anything resembling it. Class domination, not unlike Bourdieu's (2001) account of masculine domination, largely justifies differentiation for its own sake. How such differentiation might relate to the engines of exploitation remain at very most a petty concern. Indeed, while all of Bourdieu's reluctantly constructed classes seem to *live against* one another, it remains unclear how some classes might *live off* of others.

### Critique 3: Bourdieu Prioritizes Position Over Production

The third blind spot we identify is in many ways the consequence of the first two. Bourdieu emphasizes position over production. As already noted, individuals and groups exist in Bourdieusian social space through a triangular relation connecting position, disposition, and position-taking. Bourdieu largely fails to consider how each of these might be shaped by, or even help bring shape to, *relations of production*. Instead, he typically sees 'production' as a form of position-taking, and as something best examined toward the top of general social hierarchies. As such, he tends to hone in not on the productive practices of the 'working class' but on the productive practices of the 'upper class'.

In *Language and Symbolic Power* (Bourdieu, 1991: 167–168), for example, he maps a struggle between fractions of the dominant class over a 'symbolic production', namely, an imposed vision of the social world. He doubly inverts the practice of production, first by examining production among the dominant class (rather than the dominated who tend to bear the weight of labor and its exploitation) and second by examining the production of imposed symbols (rather than the production of exchangeable commodities). The dominant fraction of the dominant class (those with higher compositions of economic capital) engage in a production struggle not with workers traditionally understood, but with the dominated fraction of the dominant class (those with higher compositions of cultural capital). They struggle over the 'principles of hierarchization', and more specifically the significance of their opposing capitals (Bourdieu, 1991: 168). 'Production' in this sense is simply a practice—a position-taking—best located within social space between those with relatively high volumes of capital.

Consider, as another example, his account of 'cultural production'. While *Distinction* (Bourdieu, 1984) may be excused for emphasizing position over production since it is largely an analysis of consumption, the same cannot be said for *The Field of Cultural Production* (Bourdieu, 1993). This is a book about the generation of cultural 'works' within the literary and artistic fields. However, despite its title and focus, this is not really an analysis of a cultural labor process. Instead, it is a book about a particular field where agents, in typical Bourdieusian style, *take positions*. 'Products', be they novels, poems, paintings, or some other cultural object to be consumed by those in *Distinction* (Bourdieu, 1984), are but the effects of agents taking positions in reference to one another. And, as expected, this is structured by both position and disposition, or as Bourdieu (1993: 61) says, 'the meeting of two histories'. He sketches a field where so-called cultural producers, oriented by objective relations and

subjective structures, jockey over 'definition', 'boundary', and, of course, 'capital' (Bourdieu, 1993: 41–42). Core to this is an endless struggle over heteronomy (e.g. 'bourgeois art') and autonomy (e.g. 'art for art's sake'). Those with higher compositions of economic capital tend to defend the former, while those with higher compositions of cultural capital tend to defend the latter.

Bourdieu constructs not only a social space where everyone is a sort of capitalist, but also a space where sociologically significant 'production' seems to be concentrated toward the top. Those with low volumes of capital are, at best, the consumers of their products.

In addition to generally ignoring the productive possibilities and practices of the working class, Bourdieu never seriously considers whether spaces of positions, dispositions, and position-takings might be structured by broader relations of production. Instead, he gives us relatively autonomous fields of cultural and symbolic production positioned within a 'field of power', which is itself positioned toward the top of the 'field of class relations' (Bourdieu, 1993: 37–38). Put another way, he gives us positions that are inside positions that are inside other positions.

Returning to his 1989 lecture in Wisconsin, we find the following definition,

The field of power (which should not be confused with the political field) is not a field like the others. It is the space of the relations of force between the different kinds of capital or, more precisely, between the agents who possess a sufficient amount of one of the different kinds of capital to be in a position to dominate the corresponding field, whose struggles intensify whenever the relative values of the different kinds of capital is questioned. (Bourdieu, 1998: 34)

The field of power is a meta field, but it is still a particular terrain where agents with *sufficient* levels of capital volume struggle across particular fields via oppositions in capital composition. Like the fields it hosts, the field of power is a space of domination (e.g. economic field dominating the cultural field). And, also like these fields, the field of power seems to be void of labor and exploitation. Production, again, is at best a secondary concern for position and its complementary concepts of disposition and position-taking.

Beyond helping us understand who gets sorted into specific jobs (see, for example, Rivera, 2016), Bourdieusian class analysis generally leaves us in the dark when it comes to answering some basic questions of class analysis: How is the capacity to work translated into actual productive activity? Who owns the products and instruments of work? Who gets to coordinate the work of others, and how is that coordination structured and executed? This darkness seems to be the inevitable consequence of ignoring capital's relation to labor and domination's relation to exploitation. We are given a sociology of positions, dispositions, and position-takings and are subsequently left with almost no tools for examining relations of production beyond the upper class.

Bourdieu's emphasis of positioning over production and the so-called field of power can be contrasted with Gramsci's (2005 [1971]: 180–185) social and political 'relations of forces'. Speaking specifically about the first, Gramsci writes,

A relation of social forces which is closely linked to the structure, objective, independent of human will, and which can be measured with the systems of the exact or physical sciences. The level of development of the material forces of production provides a basis for the emergence of the various social classes, each one of which represents a function and has a specific position within production itself. (Gramsci, 2005 [1971]: 180–181)

In this formulation, positions exist within classes which themselves exist within relations of production. If Bourdieu gives us positioning over production, Gramsci gives us production over (or at least before) positioning. His classes are not rendered, as Bourdieu assumes is generally the case across the massive tradition of Marxism, as anti-relational or substantialist. They are, like Marx's versions, fundamentally relational because they concern relations of production. Bourdieu's (1998: 12) 'state of virtuality' comes in the political moment or level: 'the degree of homogeneity, self-awareness, and organization attained by the various classes' (Gramsci, 2005 [1971]: 181). We do not intend to replace an uncritical acceptance of Bourdieusian class analysis with an uncritical acceptance of Gramscian class analysis, but to highlight the enduring promise and feasibility of theorizing positions out of production, rather than the other way around.

Our central concern is that by largely ignoring labor and exploitation, Bourdieu generates a theory of positions *at the expense* of a theory of production. He gives us a framework that tasks analysts with examining position and its sibling concepts of disposition and position-taking. Production is not only at risk of losing relevance under this theory, but also at risk of being distorted. Bourdieu's most significant 'producers', at least within so-called advanced societies, seem to be concentrated toward the top of the social hierarchy among those with relatively high volumes of capital. He gives us a refreshing and insightful theory of the upper class as a productive class, but in doing so he leaves the bulk of exploited labor and its various fractions underexamined.

Bourdieu's reluctant class analysis is in many ways the default class analysis of our time, yet it is one that tends to emphasize position over production by way of neglecting labor and exploitation. If nothing else, sociologists should seriously ask whether they want, or are even convinced by, a class analysis that does not seriously account for such things. And, if they assume that labor and exploitation should still be of paramount concern, then they must also ask why the discipline has elevated a theory that tends to neglect them.

## Conclusion

Assuming our criticisms are valid, there appear to be two ways forward. First, we may want to jettison Bourdieusian class analysis altogether. That is the position taken by Riley (2017), who concludes that Bourdieu's popularity has little to do with his ability to clarify or predict class relations and more to do with his resonance with academic sensibilities. Like us, he points to Bourdieu's weak conceptualization of class. It is certainly hard to defend any brand of analysis that provides inadequate tools for understanding its core object. However, ditching Bourdieusian class analysis entirely on these grounds risks sacrificing Bourdieu's useful insights, of which we think there are many despite our focused critique in this article (see also Burawoy, 2018; Heilbron and Steinmetz, 2018).

There is also a second path worth considering. Rather than look for classes within generic social space, we can look for classes within the relations of production. This does not mean, as Bourdieu assumes, an uncritical acceptance of classes on paper. Such elaborations and ‘theory effects’ are indeed problematic. That is why we should equally reject capitals on paper. We should be careful not to fall into the trap of thinking Bourdieu’s ‘capitals’ are any more relational or less substantialist than Marx’s ‘classes’.

Beginning with an assumption of productive relations should be no less concerning than beginning with an assumption of social space. If anything, the former is a preferable assumption because it necessitates a concern not just for capital but also for labor and exploitation. As both Bourdieu (1986: 241) and Marx (1978 [1849]: 207) remind us, *capital is accumulated labor*. Marx may not account for its varying ‘species’, but Bourdieu arguably does something much worse in failing to detail the dynamics of the accumulation process within capitalism. Something like ‘cultural capital’ may still be worthy of analysis, but it should be more explicitly linked to a theory of labor and accumulation. This would, of course, require a prioritization of exploitation, which Bourdieu generally neglects. Moreover, domination can still matter and it can even matter independent of exploitation, but if capital is accumulated labor, we should emphasize methods that clarify the extraction of labor effort. This requires a theory of positions, and can therefore also include a theory of dispositions and position-takings, but this should not be assembled at the expense of a theory of productive relations.

Such an analysis has the potential to improve our understandings of how dynamic relations of exploitation generate increased differentiation within and across classes. Indeed, capitalist developmental processes generate profound differentiation and that should be a key focus of any class analysis today (McCarthy and Desan, 2023). The basic relations of exploitation and capitalist competition create a social dynamic for differentiation across firms in profit margins, technological development, capital/labor ratios, and, of course, the wages and benefits paid out to managers and workers (Botwinick, 2014 [1993]). Capitalist development *does not* generate a convergence in class experiences, that in Bourdieusian terms is made complicated by other species of capital. Instead, it creates variation in positions, dispositions, and position-takings, and this makes salient those other principles of differentiation as grounds for practice.

It may be this differentiation, fundamentally but not absolutely rooted to the relations of production, that underscore divisions and segmentations in what Bourdieu calls ‘social space’. Said space may, as he says, be ‘multi-dimensional’ and ‘constructed empirically by discovering the main factors of differentiation which account for the differences observed in a given social universe’ (Bourdieu, 1987: 3–4). Yet, it is in the dynamism of productive relations, which is itself a process of differentiation under capitalism, that the proliferation of such universes becomes structurally possible. Bourdieusian class analysis largely fails to account for this. Instead, it is a tradition that calls on sociologists to look for ‘*forms of capital . . . like aces in a game of cards*’ (Bourdieu, 1987: 4, emphasis in original). An alternative approach—one that looks beyond Bourdieu but does not abandon his concepts entirely—could resist fetishizing all forms of capital and always consider how they are related to exploited labor.

We are partial to a version of this that maps social space *within* the relations of production. Such a move turns Bourdieu’s theory of class upside-down and inside-out. We can see elements of this in existing labor studies that draw on, but do not necessarily begin or end with, Bourdieusian

concepts. Sallaz (2010), for example, builds on a theory of habitus to examine the extraction of service labor effort. Likewise, Gibson-Light (2023) draws on a theory of capital forms to make sense not just of labor stratification but also labor processes in prison. Neither bring labor into Bourdieusian sociology as much as they bring select Bourdieusian concepts into the study of labor.

The difference is important. If our three critiques are correct, then Bourdieusian class analysis needs, at minimum, a more structural and specific conceptualization of productive relations to begin with. Flemmen puts it as such,

Class cannot be treated as only a question of distributions of capital in however many dimensions. In Marxian and Weberian theory alike, class refers to fundamental social relationships—of exploitation, domination and/or closure. These cannot be represented gradationally in terms of volume or composition of capital. While retaining social space as a model of the class or stratification structure, one also needs to conceptualize class relationships in the conventional sense and link this to the particular structure of social space. (Flemmen, 2013: 336)

We agree. Bourdieusian social space may not need to be abandoned entirely, but it needs a more fundamental account of class. This necessitates an explicit examination of labor, exploitation, and relations of production.

That said, our invitation in this article is less to a specific framework and more to a general critique of Bourdieusian class analysis. We argue that Bourdieu assembles capitals on paper, theorizes domination without exploitation, and prioritizes position over production. At bare minimum, sociologists should better recognize the core assumptions he makes. A class theory that generally ignores labor and exploitation may be one that conceals more than it reveals.

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## Footnotes

1. Korom's (2020: 134) citation study somewhat arbitrarily excludes theorists who died before World War I (1914). Thus, Durkheim and Weber are included, but Marx is not.
2. In another lecture, Bourdieu (1998: 32) said, 'Social science should construct not classes, but rather the social spaces in which classes can be demarcated, but which only exist on paper'. See also his discussion of 'constructed' and 'theoretical' classes (Bourdieu, 1984: 106–109, 1991: 229–251).

3. This phrasing is inspired by Mies (2014 [1986]: 36), who argues ‘If we do not talk of exploitation . . . subordination hangs somewhere in the air’.

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