

5-2015

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Recommended Citation

McCabe, Daniel (2015) "A Critique of Bourdieu and Passeron's Educational Reform in The Inheritors," *Akadimia Filosofia*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 1 , Article 6.

Available at: <https://fordham.bepress.com/apps/vol1/iss1/6>

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A Critique of Bourdieu and Passeron's Educational Reform in The Inheritors

Daniel McCabe

Abstract: *Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron's The Inheritors critically examines the French education system in the 1960s. The Inheritors is a compilation of sociological studies on university students in the Arts which the authors use a premises for their education reform citing issues in the traditional system that allow bourgeois students to have an unfair advantage due to their cultured upbringing. The main systemic problem within French education is identified by Bourdieu and Passeron as the charismatic ideology that awards cultural, theoretical knowledge over merit and effort. To resolve the bias within the traditional French education system, a revolutionary new education system is proposed which will eliminate social advantages from education by using sociological methodology and achievements will aim at rewarding pure academic knowledge and effort. Bourdieu and Passeron's research identifies a link between academic success and privilege, while opposing the under-privileged, thus leading the authors to postulate ways to resolve this inequality; but in doing so, the authors abandon scientific research and opt instead for romanticized concepts of democracy and equality which ultimately moves the argument from educational reform into quasi-civil reform.*

In *The Inheritors*, the French education system in the 1960's is characterized as an unfair system which favors charisma over intelligence, thus leading to bias towards students born with an affluent background. Those students born to a prosperous upper class family, referred to as the *privileged* or *bourgeois*,

inherit cultural knowledge through their upbringing where activities within the Arts are encouraged and accessible. Contrastingly, less privileged children do not receive the same amount of cultural knowledge from their family and environment as the bourgeois children; and thus they rely on the French education system to acquire such knowledge.⁵⁷ This unbalanced knowledge of culture between the privileged and non-privileged leads unfair playing field among students once they reach university in France. The French university system once again perpetuates this division by assessing students on their knowledge of cultural events and ideas: those taught within the lecture hall and those not explicitly taught by teachers.⁵⁸ By this schema, students' academic success or failure does not necessarily correlate to their ability to learn or amount of effort applied; but rather to the cultural knowledge bank a student brings with him or her into the university.⁵⁹

The authors of *The Inheritors* claim the inequality within French universities can be traced back to the very beginnings of schooling where the charisma ideology and its essentialism originate as the social prefix to education.⁶⁰ The charisma ideology is labeled as the arbitrary justification the privileged use "to see their success as the confirmation of natural, personal gifts."⁶¹ *The Inheritors* advocates for the "unmasking of cultural privilege" and the exposing of the charisma ideology as a farce; but its acceptance is so deeply seeded within French society and education that such a removal requires a monumental shift in the

⁵⁷ Bourdieu, Pierre, and Jean Claude Passeron. *The Inheritors: French Students and Their Relation to Culture* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1979), 21.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Bourdieu, Passeron, 20.

⁶⁰ Bourdieu, Passeron, 70.

⁶¹ Bourdieu, Passeron, 71.

French psyche.⁶² The embedding of the charisma ideology within the French psyche is exemplified by the fact that, instead of fighting against this arbitrary ideology, the under-privileged class accepts its essentialism in the hope that they may reach an elite social status through success in academia.⁶³ Students' parents also reinforce the charisma ideology when they associate their children's shortcomings in school, even at an early age, to their lack of a "gift," sadly for the working class, this misguided admission only works to bolster social inequality.⁶⁴ The charisma ideology parasitically attaches itself as the basis to the French education system, and its essentialism becomes the criteria for evaluation of students all the way through the university level. The authors of *The Inheritors* claim that the privileged class actively promote this ideology in order to prevent teachers from critical self-evaluation which would lead them to question their lot in life as well as perpetuating the status of elite family lines.⁶⁵ By setting the education system's methodology to favor the privileged class, the traditional French elite are able to retain their social control and power.⁶⁶

Bourdieu and Passeron also challenge the telos of the French education system by citing a paradoxical relationship between how teachers teach and how students are theoretically supposed to act. They claim students and professors agree to denounce student passivity, while at the same time students are conditioned to be the passive agent during class.⁶⁷ So the student is faced with a dilemma; he or she must learn from a lecturer, study for exams, and

respond to questions given by their teacher; while simultaneously preparing for the future and an occupation.⁶⁸ This brings the authors to a point of contention over the job of a student: how can a student be both a intellectual pupil while simultaneously preparing for a occupation outside academia.⁶⁹ In other words, "to study is not to produce, but to produce a capacity to produce."⁷⁰ As a result, a student worries about studying because he believes that each test contributes greatly to his success outside of school; but in his/her distress he or she turns to magic and superstition, putting faith in a extraordinary force instead of relying on their personal attributes.⁷¹ The pressure a student feels for an exam about abstract knowledge and his or her retreat to magic is detrimental to his or her future, according the Bourdieu and Passeron. In the similar way, a teacher expresses a desire for active student participation, but is weary of students who could undermine his or her seat of authority.⁷² So to protect their authority and job security, teachers utilize student passivity to defend their lectures from defamation.⁷³ The paradox created by a dual-telos of the French university system is advantageous for bourgeois students because they are less nervous about the impact that their academic success will have on their careers and do not rely on the teacher for complete cultural knowledge. Therefore despite the limited power of universities to prepare students for careers; privileged students "implicitly possess the means of satisfying" any university requirements.⁷⁴

To balance the French education system and primarily the university system, Bourdieu and Passeron advocate for a "truly

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Bourdieu, Passeron, 70.

⁶⁴ Bourdieu, Passeron, 72.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Bourdieu, Passeron, 73.

⁶⁷ Bourdieu, Passeron, 56.

⁶⁸ Bourdieu, Passeron, 56-57

⁶⁹ Bourdieu, Passeron, 55.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Bourdieu, Passeron, 65.

⁷² Bourdieu, Passeron, 63.

⁷³ Bourdieu, Passeron, 65.

⁷⁴ Bourdieu, Passeron, 75.

democratic education.”⁷⁵ To achieve a democratization of the French education system several conditions must be met. A *rational pedagogy* is foremost in Bourdieu and Passeron’s democratization of education proposal, so that social inequalities may be acknowledged and negated throughout French education with the utilization of sociology.⁷⁶ While a rational pedagogy is necessary for a democratic process of reform to occur, the true democratization of the entire French education system is inherent to the survival of such a pedagogy.⁷⁷ The establishment of a rational pedagogy would then lead to self-reflection by teachers who upon examination should attribute their title and occupation to their merit through labor rather than to “natural gifts.”⁷⁸ When teachers and the influencers of education renounce the charisma ideology and its essentialism, then education can be reformatted to promote research, merit, and intellectual growth; not cultural inequalities and social hierarchies. With the eradication of the charisma ideology from the French education system, its removal as a French social norm should also follow as children will no longer be subjected to unfair academic assessments. One proposed replacement evaluation method for academia is based on “the estimation of merits in Kantian ethics” which assess students against themselves.⁷⁹ In this method, a student is given a starting-point value which represents his or her level of knowledge that is socially gained and their starting-point grade will be compared against a value representing their knowledge within academia to produce a final assessment value. Another alternative evaluation scale would be to compare students within

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Bourdieu, Passeron, 76.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Bourdieu, Passeron, 70.

⁷⁹ Bourdieu, Passeron, 68.

categories where they are assessed alongside fair competition.⁸⁰ But along with whichever assessment method is chosen, teachers would also need to be trained to judge the content of students’ works above a students’ eloquence in language or knowledge beyond the classroom. In the traditional education system, theoretical ambition is most rewarded; but to curb social inequalities, works need to be examined according to what is taught in class or assigned and not to cultural advantages.⁸¹

The solutions provided by *The Inheritors* aim to resolve the cultural inequalities and bourgeois-favoritism which Bourdieu and Passeron paint as systematically ingrained into the French universities. Their goal, while noble, is not on par with the sociological research which is presented at the beginning. Their plan for the democratization of the education system is vaguely defined, then immediately elevated to superiority over the traditional and technocratic education systems. The flaw of *The Inheritors*’ overarching solution is the fact that it lacks supporting evidence stemming from sociological research, while Bourdieu and Passeron’s critiques of the traditional schema nearly universally from sociological experiments. In this way, their proposed democratization of French education relies completely on theoretical hypotheses created to solve scientifically identified issues. The reformation ideas from *The Inheritors*, therefore, are simply deduced theoretical propositions without tangible evidence. For this reason, one could reject Bourdieu and Passeron’s complete overhaul of the education system in favor of smaller changes which work within the traditional system and would require less dramatic and revolutionary actions. Without research and evidence to support the absolute change recommended

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Bourdieu, Passeron, 69.

within *The Inheritors*, the smaller changes are a more plausible and obtainable solution. But problems and contradictions identified within the traditional system by Bourdieu and Passeron's research does present a strong arguments which pressure French society to critically examine their education system and give a rallying cry to under-privileged individuals who feel disenfranchised by the cultural inequalities promoted throughout all levels of French education.

Bourdieu and Passeron's sociological research within *The Inheritors* is important as it exposes potential 'class racism' within the French education system and draws a link between cultural inequalities and the so-called *charisma ideology*.⁸² The findings allow French citizens to critically examine the issues with their traditional education system and provides solutions, though extreme, to the consider in discourse over reformation. Although the solutions championed by Bourdieu and Passeron require total change and remodeling which is difficult or near impossible without concrete evidence, their premises are valid complaints about the unfair relationship between socio-economic backgrounds and academic achievement. Therefore *The Inheritors* is an important research document which identified inequalities within its study group and has plausible connections to greater inequalities throughout the whole education system in France, the solutions proposed do not have the same evidence for their support and call for reforms which usually stem from national social and civil reform which then in turn change the culture within education; not vice-versa.

⁸² Bourdieu, Passeron, 70.