

The Seeds of Inequality

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Poverty and great social inequality are being created at this very moment in the routines of small children. Talking, eating, socializing, taking care of oneself, keeping oneself clean, dressing, obeying, and learning: children's sociological future is determined by the adoption of even the most trivial of habits.

About: Bernard Lahire (ed.), *Enfances de classe. De l'inégalité parmi les enfants* (Children in Class: Inequality among Children) Éditions du Seuil, 2019, 1230 p.

In a book whose scope of inquiry is as impressive as its length (1,230 pages), Bernard Lahire and his collaborators ask a question that is central to sociology and foundational to contemporary democratic societies: what are inequality's social and familial roots? The book's originality, relevance, and contemporary significance lie in the questions it asks and the scale of its empirical inquiry. Against a sociology of generalities that contents itself with repeating the same old things, and against the excesses of subjectivist approaches that reduce inequalities to how social actors perceive them, Lahire's volume subscribes to a critical empirical sociology that seeks to unveil the processes by which living conditions and family socialization underpin inequality from schooling's very beginning. In this way, it follows what might be described as a "classic" epistemological framework, invoking, in turn, in its early chapters, Émile Durkheim, Charles Darwin, Auguste Comte, Pierre Bourdieu, and Jean-Claude Passeron in order to establish a science of social facts (p. 46). For "sociologists are not [...] ideologues, but producers of truths about the social world, which include truths about inequality and domination" (p. 49).

Documenting Social Inequality Among Children

The book assembles the extensive research conducted by Lahire and undertaken over a four-year period by seventeen sociologists involved in the ANR project “Childhood in Class and Gender: Early Socialization under Multiple Constraints of Children Aged Five to Six.” At an empirical level, the study examined thirty-five children aged five to six, leading to the collection of

“175 in-depth interviews of parents (three interviews per family), a significant member of the family circle (a nanny, a grandmother, etc.) who played an important role in the child’s socialization (one interview), and a primary school teacher (one interview), in addition to [...] ethnographic observations conducted at school (in the classroom and during recess) as well as the child’s home, and, last but not least, little language exercises conducted with the children, which sought to objectify the extent of their vocabulary, their mastery of syntax, and their ability to provide narrative explanations of event sequences (p. 15).”

Equipped with these empirical tools, laid out in chapter three, the authors introduce the readers into the familial and social universes of these thirty-five children to understand simultaneously the power of family socialization, its implications for their habitus, and its connection to their educational future. In short, to understand the mark social domination leaves on their bodies, future, ambitions, and desires.

To this end, the book’s structure allows for a multiplicity of perspectives. After a theoretical and programmatic first part, the book offers, in part two, a vast panorama of children’s life in France in the 2020s. The ethnographic descriptions are highly rigorous in the systematicity of their observations and fascinating in the contrasts they bring to light. Libertad, a little Roma girl, whose parents dream of seeing her become a singer, sees her life punctuated by upheaval and evictions. Annabelle was raised in a middle-class family with a mother and grandmother that carefully control the games she downloads to her iPad. Mathis, for his part, lives with his family in a large, two-hundred-square-foot house “in a very posh suburb to the west of Paris” (p. 792).

The Social Fabrication of Children

This panorama of French society seen from children’s perspective offers a lively, embodied, and innovative picture of social stratification in France. It goes significantly beyond easy observations about the unequal conditions that structure—and divide—

French society, suggesting how these inequalities are physically embodied in all their violence, consequences, and unfairness, yet without succumbing to miserabilism. Part three provides a transversal analysis of the thirty-five case studies that seeks to convey “the social fabrication of children.” In this way, the book deals with housing, work, money, schooling, relationships with authority, speech, leisure, etc. to show how individualities are constructed in differentiated and hierarchical social universes, opening the way to a fine-grained understanding of the differentiated mechanisms through which individuality is constructed in the social space. These chapters, like the book as a whole, are expertly conceived and written. They help the reader to understand how social stratification constructs bodies and minds through the complex processes through which young children are socialized, how this stratification becomes embodied, and the daily microprocesses through which social positions are inscribed in time, space, and bodies. For instance, Valentine, who was raised on the Parisian bourgeoisie, does dancing “to improve her posture,” the authors specify, “not simply for relaxation [...] Standing up straight is a way of achieving the bourgeois idea of the body, which must be concerned with posture” (p. 890).

This review is unable to offer a detailed account of each chapter. But to give just one example, the first chapter of part three, “Living Somewhere: The Social Framework of Inequality,” by Frédérique Giraud, Julien Bertrand, Martine Court and Sarah Nicaise (pp. 933-952) shows how the space in which one lives shapes the individual, their self-esteem, and their “value,” in their own eyes and that of others. The social construction of the individual through space appears in all its violence when one compares the social destiny of Isham, who has to sleep in his mother’s car, to that of Mathis, who regularly spends his vacations in his grandfather’s villa in Mauritius. Such inequalities, it might be objected, have long been known. This is no doubt true. But the analyses provided go well beyond merely noting these facts, showing their effects on individuals, their way of being, their mind, their soul, and their destiny. In this way, the sociologist’s work does not limit itself to denunciation, but seeks to understand the effects of these inequalities on the construction of individuals, their psychology, appearance, and self-image. This part’s other chapters are in a similar vein: they shed light on French society as a whole through a sociology of childhood that reveals the mechanisms of social transmission not only of habituses and inequalities, but also of domination.

Chapters 6 and 7 of the same part explore, building on the work of the British sociologist Basil Bernstein (1975), the construction of language competency within the family space. It is well known that these competencies are closely tied with children's

school trajectories (Lahire, 1993). The two chapters are jointly authored by Marianne Woollven, Olivier Vanhée, Gaële Henri-Panabière, Fanny Renard and Lahire. They reveal the modes of transmission of these competencies in micro-family interactions: reading to children at night, the hierarchies of literary genres that parents explicitly or implicitly articulate, the value attributed to children's utterances in the family space, the proximity of foreign languages and the valued assigned to them. Such practices "do not favor to the same degree the constitution of a reflective relationship to language and the narrative structure" (p. 1037, 1038). The approach becomes even more fine-tuned when it seeks to understand how this reflective relationship to language plays out in interactions between parents and children and in contrasting ways depending on a family's cultural capital: the way the regulation of conflict through language is or is not emphasized, or different ways of using humor and wordplay as a means for learning this reflexivity.

"These family practices, of humor and wordplay, constitute an unequally distributed resource, which allows children to become familiarized more or less precociously with the properties and powers of language and to develop a taste for these usages in an emotional context other than that of pedagogical repetition and school-based evaluation" (p. 1049).

These results are reminiscent of Annette Lareau's findings (2011), which showed how, in the United States, language fully participates in children's socialization. Privileged families use language as an end in and for itself, whereas its use in working-class milieus is more functional. These usages lead children early on to internalize their social position and its legitimacy.

In short, like any major work that deconstructs the order of things, *Enfances de classe* stimulates reflection on social institutions—the family, schools, language, and so on—and on French society in general. It shows that one is not born dominant or dominated; one becomes so. The book carefully presents, demonstrates, and dismantles these mechanisms. But its contribution goes much further. Thanks to these thirty-five carefully described case studies of family circumstances, the resulting transversal analyses, and conclusions drawn by the authors, readers themselves undergo a process of reflexivity, reconsidering their childhoods, lives as parents, and place in society—in short, their responsibility. For a work of sociology, this is a rare quality indeed.

The State, Freedom, Sociology

The book's conclusion broaches more general considerations on human society and the cultural and material accumulation that characterizes our species. Given the existence of inheritance and the fact that parents who themselves experience social inequality raise their own children, the reproduction of inequality must be expected. Under these conditions, how is one to fight a phenomenon so deeply rooted in who we are as human beings? Posed in these terms, the problem seems unresolvable. Even so, the author suggests two possible solutions. In the first place, he calls for greater state intervention, since "each time the state retreats from domains related to the family [...] inequality between social classes deepens and possibilities are foreclosed" (p. 1179). The second solution concerns sociology itself. If this discipline were "very widely spread, it would allow all members of society to see the broader frameworks to which they belonged" (p. 1175). These solutions are interesting, essentially for the potential debates they will provoke. First, it is not certain that the state always guarantees complete and perfect equality. Its action can also be normalizing and stigmatizing, as studies of non-recourse to social policy demonstrates (Warin, 2016). Next, relating to sociology's diffusion and ability to enlighten citizens, it would first be necessary for *sociology* to exist, which, given the discipline's intellectual dispersal, is debatable. Finally—and to reiterate Hugues Draelants' note in these pages—one might imagine that deeper thinking about educational policies, their conception, and their implementation might provide keys to reducing inequality in schools, of course, but also in society as a whole.

We can only support the wish made by the authors in the conclusion: "May this book contribute to the unequal order of things being recognized, contested, and disputed" (p. 1179).

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