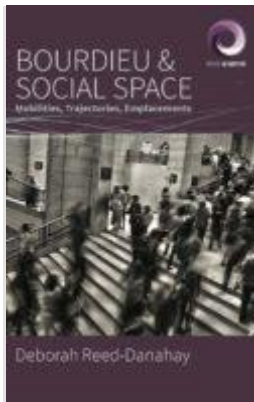


The Power of Epistemological Principles

Review by Dr. Raoul Galli

September 21, 2020



Bourdieu and Social Space: Mobilities, Trajectories, Emplacements

by [Deborah Reed-Danahay](#)

Published 2019

Berghahn Books



Keywords: social space; mobility; migration; trajectory; habitus

The problem that American anthropologist Deborah Reed-Danahay sets out to solve in *Bourdieu and Social Space* (2020) is, as the title suggests, what Pierre Bourdieu really meant and did with the notion of social space. Reed-Danahay's knowledge of Bourdieu's life and work is well known (Reed-Danahay 2002; 2004; 2005). In the present study, however, this knowledge is deepened by new readings of selected works to better understand and apply not only a central concept but the whole of Bourdieu's general theory of the economy of practices. Reed-Danahay accomplishes this via what has been called the "mother category" (Wacquant 2018:11) in Bourdieu's social topology—*social space*—a concept that Bourdieu, according to the author, was less explicit in defining compared with habitus and field. The chosen *modus operandi* here is therefore new readings in order to closely examine how Bourdieu handled the question of spatiality throughout his production by constantly observing the relationship between spatial, temporal and social dimensions of social reality.

Deborah Reed-Danahay's aim is twofold: to provide a "comprehensive overview of Bourdieu's theory of social space across the span of his career" (2) and to make a contribution to the ongoing research on mobility and migration, where *emplacement* is said to be an emerging focus. Reed-Danahay thus argues "for an ethnographic approach to mobility that is informed by the concept of social space" (2) and that better can explain the voluntary or forced social and geographical movements of individuals and groups from original to new settings and realities

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through physical and social space. Paths and passages that Bourdieu himself more technically depicted in terms of *trajectories*. Hence the book's subtitle: *Mobilities, Trajectories, Emplacements*.

Reed-Danahay primarily uses Bourdieu's own theoretical tools in her investigation. The approach is well known from the author's previous work on Bourdieu and from other researchers' studies of Bourdieu (including Bourdieu's own self-reflexive analyses). The primary reason for this being the forceful "world-making" that Bourdieu devoted himself to via his systemic concepts, and which might be best understood through exactly the critically affirmative approach to evaluate the opportunities and limitations in Bourdieu's research program, that Reed-Danahay applies.

The book consists of five chapters, an introduction and a conclusion. The first chapter contains the nowadays almost ritualistic element in the "field of Bourdieusian studies" where authors seem forced to repeatedly explain their basic understanding of Bourdieu's "theoretical framework." Then follows three chapters consisting of new readings of some of Bourdieu's studies in Béarn, Kabylia and Algeria; the French literary field of Flaubert's 19th century; the space of lifestyles and distinctions in France of the 1970s; the incipient neoliberal effects on the French housing market in the shift between the 1970s and 1980s; as well as Bourdieu's investigations from the late 1980s and onwards on the State, the national social space and the "field of power." Reed-Danahay then devotes Chapter 5 to an application of the insights from the foregoing pages onto a completely different empirical object—the European Union—outlining a tentative analysis of the union as a social space within which internally and externally generated mobility and migration, creates life situations where individuals and groups arrive in new social and physical spaces in search of more or less durable recognitions and emplacements.

If Bourdieu's subjectivist moment was strongly present in Reed-Danahay's previous study of habitus and emotions (Reed-Danahay 2005), this time it is more of Bourdieu's objectivist moment that meets the reader. This is logical and follows from the focus on social space. But when the author here also uses habitus to talk about the embodied structures of individuals and groups, it sometimes becomes a bit too objectivist and almost formalistic when the author more than fifteen times explains habitus to be a "position in social space," and that habitus "occupies a place in physical space and a position in social space" (22), when the general understanding is that the "theory of habitus rests, after all, upon a view of childhood inculcation that shapes the worldviews and dispositions of habitus" (97). This kind of objectivist formalism is unfortunate because it causes doubt in the advanced Bourdieu reader who soon may be irritated over other peculiarities that are at best unfortunate mistakes, but which could be signs of deeper misunderstandings. As when Reed-Danahay rightly points out that Bourdieu appreciated Erving Goffman's work and considered the interactionist perspective indeed to be an important form of social explanation, but that it at the same time could not replace the analytical and explanatory power of the deeper and underlying structure (*vis insita*) that in fact both informs and structures interaction observed on the surface of social life. Here Bourdieu, to understand how this underlying structure is constituted, developed his theory of the historical differentiation and distribution of different forms of capital in

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advanced capitalist societies. However, when Reed-Danahay conscientiously explains how Bourdieu understands and defines capital, an unfortunate error occurs twice in the transmission of a quote in which Bourdieu's central explanatory term "immanent" becomes the similarly spelled but completely differently signifying "imminent" (30; 67).

Deborah Reed-Danahay undoubtedly belongs to the not too many who really have the training to rightly decipher Pierre Bourdieu's multilayered work. Therefore, instead of devoting so many words and pages referring to countless other researchers who have done something that may possibly remind or converge with Bourdieu's work, one would wish that Reed-Danahay had devoted more interest in the underlying epistemological principles that from the beginning to the end informed Bourdieu's research program (Wacquant 2018). I am thinking of principles like that of the primacy of relations; the epistemological break with preconstructions; the construction of the object; of radical historicization; and the three spaces (and not only two) of Bourdieu's social topology where the *symbolic space* arguably forms the most important dimension for understanding Bourdieu and how different types of arbitrary power relations, with the help of symbols, classifications and representation can be turned into legitimate dominance and a "natural" social order. With a more focused use of these principles the theoretical application on the European Union in Chapter 5 would have looked quite different. A policy preconstruction like that other "social space" in the hands of EU-politicians and eurocrats, would for example never have been put on par with Bourdieu's scientific notion bearing no deeper resemblance with the former term except for the name. And so would the attempt to construct the EU as a "supranational social space" (a scholarly preconstruction) when the union so clearly first forms an *international* social space between twenty-seven externally and internally differentiated states, territories, and populations. Some basic questions for constructing the object would from the outset have had to be asked, like: what is it that is at stake in the EU; what is the field specific capital that in the EU functions both as the valued property admitting for entry into the union, and as the active form of power that structures the underlying *field of forces* that constitutes hierarchies and polarities in the EU, and which also structures the *field of struggles* where interaction in the form of, say, classification struggles on issues such as citizenship, mobility, migration and various groups' political recognition constantly constitute the political agenda.

Deborah Reed-Danahay is an excellent reader and mediator of Bourdieu's studies and publications. For readers who want one more book that will help them get an even deeper understanding of the relationship between Pierre Bourdieu's social trajectory and his scientific work, this is an absolute masterpiece. However, for those who feel ready with this type of study and who are looking for more concrete guidance to the scientific craft itself, that is, the application of all or selected parts of Bourdieu's extensive research program, this book is unfortunately not it, because when it comes to the creative theoretical application of parts of Bourdieu's research program onto a self-formulated problem and empirical material, *Bourdieu and Social Space* is not sufficiently convincing.

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