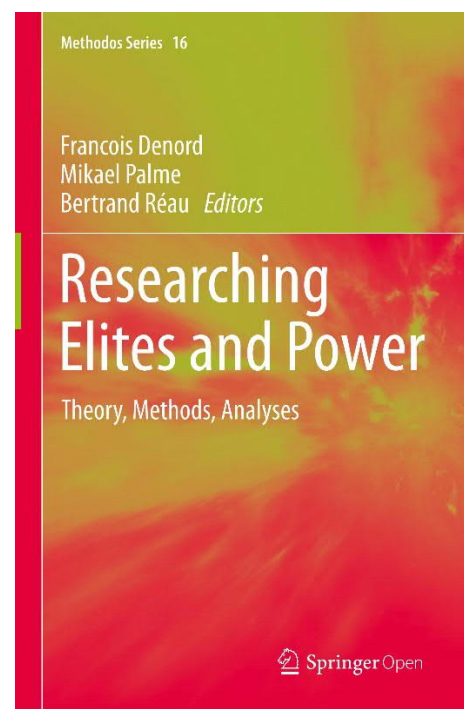


Mikael Palme & Bertrand Réau, "Chapter 16. A Sociology of the Dominant Class. An Interview with Monique Pinçon-Charlot and Michel Pinçon", pp. 203–211 i François Denord, Mikael Palme & Bertrand Réau (eds), *Researching Elites and Power. Theory, Methods, Analyses*, Springer Nature, Switzerland 2020

Publ. i aug. 2020. Volymen tillgänglig som open access från förlaget, <https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007%2F978-3-030-45175-2>



# Chapter 16

## A Sociology of the Dominant Class.

### An Interview with Monique Pinçon-Charlot and Michel Pinçon



Mikael Palme and Bertrand Réau

*In your writings on methodology, you often make the point that the personal background and social position of the sociologist count, not the least in the encounter with the upper class. So, what about you?*

Monique was born into the provincial petty bourgeoisie. Her father was a magistrate, and her grandfather on her father's side was a physician in the small town of Boën-sur-Lignon, Loire. On her mother's side, her grandfather was a low-level silk industrial in Saint-Etienne, specialised in ribbon weaving. At the time, in that world, women did no work except from serving their husband and raising the children. On both sides, family homes hosted large gatherings and holidays with cousins. The shared joys of meals at long tables, blackberry picking, mushroom hunting, intrigue between the girls' and the boys' dorms and swimming in freezing ponds introduced the cousin turned sociologist to the enchanted world of castles, and made her keenly aware of the allure such places could have for children. However, Monique's childhood and adolescence were also spent in Mende, the prefecture of the rural department of Lozère, where her father worked as a prosecutor. It was virtually a cultural wasteland then; even TV only made it there by the early 1960s. This social and geographical background fostered a relation to the capital's high society that has been characterized by a mix of distance and closeness. Lozère is far from the chic neighbourhoods of the west of Paris. Yet, at the same time, spending one's adolescence in the company of the children of local senior officials and small businessmen

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Translation from French by Jean-Yves Bart

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made it somewhat easier to relate to the upper class, to acquire a relative but genuine ease in the art of conversation, language and manners.

Michel's childhood and adolescent experiences were quite different. He was born into the rural world of a village in the Ardennes, Lonny, where he lived until he was eight. His father, the son of a steelworker in Nouzonville, in the industrial part of the Meuse Valley, was an orphan by age 15, and soon left for the Paris area, where he joined his brother, a polisher in Renault's Billancourt factories. Having learned that trade himself, he then went back to the Ardennes to do the same work until the war. After the debacle and the Occupation, the metal dust he had inhaled over the years made it impossible for him to keep working as a polisher, and he found a job as a bank messenger at the Charleville branch of the national bank for commerce and industry, the BNCI, which later became BNP, and then BNP Paribas. This was in 1950. Michel's only sister, who was 12 years older than him, got married, and the family left Lonny for the regional capital. There, Michel gradually developed an awareness of his position in society and of the existence of social worlds other than his own. Michel's father had become a bank employee, at the lowest level, around 1945, at a time when he was already over 40 years old. But the family, who lived in a cramped, three-room apartment without a bathroom, kept identifying as resolutely working-class – “we're just workers”. This experience inspired Michel to write a book on the crisis of blue-collar work in the Meuse valley, *Désarrois ouvriers* (l'Harmattan 1987).

*You have published about twenty books about the upper class, starting with *Dans les beaux quartiers* in 1989. How did this sociological project begin?*

We had both previously worked on other social environments: Michel on workers in the Ardennes and Monique on the middle class. We were affiliated with a research centre in urban sociology where Marxist scholars dominated. We never abandoned Marx's theory of exploitation, but we combined it with Pierre Bourdieu's sociology of domination. In the 1970s, the dominant class, the bourgeoisie, was analysed theoretically in terms of antagonistic class relations, but the members of that class were spared sociological, anthropological or ethnological investigations. In 1986, we started working together to put flesh and blood on the skeleton of class domination. Analysing residential segregation among the wealthy was the most accessible introduction to this intimidating new field of research. For a few weeks, we moved into a fancy hotel in a bourgeois neighbourhood of Paris. We walked around, observed and talked to passers-by, shopkeepers and servants. This unknown world began to open up to us. This early investigation became the first book, *Dans les beaux quartiers* (1989). We were encouraged by Pierre Bourdieu, who had already published work on the spatial materialization of social differentiations in the world of Parisian haute couture, but our Marxist colleagues did not see the point of it and were wary, critical, even, of our undertaking. Perhaps this was simply because there was no funding for research on the rich: they did not pose problems to the public administrations that funded research, on which we depended both when we were researchers in a non-profit and after 1978, when we had CNRS research status, but still needed to secure funds to be able to conduct studies.

*In that book, and in those that followed in the 1990s, like *Quartiers bourgeois, quartiers d'affaires* (1992), *La chasse à courre* (1993), *Grandes fortunes. Dynasties familiales et formes de richesse en France* (1996) and *Les Rothschild. Une famille bien ordonnée* (1998), you tackle multiple dimensions of the upper class: spatial, social, cultural and economic...*

We were familiar with the spatial angle, as we had previously worked on urban segregation and housing. But very few researchers had applied the tools of urban sociology to the dominant class and its neighbourhoods. Likewise, the statistical data and indicators produced for political and administrative purposes are under-used when it comes to analysing the residential spaces of the most well-off citizens. By drawing on demographic, economic or electoral data, it was possible to show how the upper class uses wealth and power to create inseparably geographical and social spaces, allowing members of that class to live in places from which other classes are excluded. These are also pleasant places, less populated, quiet, with well-maintained green areas. That class has the economic, political and social means to turn social distance into spatial distance. This isn't just about exclusion, about rejecting poorer families, but about bringing together and aggregating socially proximate families, which is one of several conditions for the development of the society life that is so crucial to the reproduction of the dominant class. More broadly, spatial position is one of the most manifest forms of expression of an individual, a family or a social group's social position. Our more detailed studies also show that internal divides within the bourgeoisie are reflected spatially, including the distinction between the old bourgeoisie and its more recent components. Additionally, the bourgeoisie creates protected places in those spaces, such as clubs or balls, which are points of condensation of social excellence, where the spatial aggregation process meets the social co-optation process.

The sociological importance of the clubs, like the Jockey Club, was one of our first findings. That it is located in the heart of Paris and extends over such a vast area whilst being frequented by a socially extremely select attendance attests to the power over space wielded by the bourgeoisie. One cannot imagine an association reserved to the members of other social classes occupying such a site. It operates based on the highly selective model of the social co-optation of new members, and is a venue for the bourgeois and most notably the aristocrats to meet and make themselves known. There's a whole social hierarchy between the clubs, with the Jockey Club at the top and the Rotary at the bottom, in which members are differentiated according to seniority, fortune, influence, etc.; economic wealth is not enough. Thanks to a recommendation, we were able to access the Jockey Club's directories, which allowed us to get a statistical overview of the social and geographical backgrounds of its members. The *rallies* are a sort of organized circles reserved to young people, and carefully planned by mothers to enable their children to get to know and love their socially kindred peers by spending leisure time with them. This may include going out to see plays or exhibits, travelling or attending high society functions together.

*What have been your most important methodological tools? You refer to interviews, ethnographic observations, secondary sources on individuals, families and institutions like clubs. Reading your books, one gets the sense that interviews seem to be an important instrument?*

First off, there is no single interview method. Interviews will vary according to social context. Early in his career, Michel did interviews with workers in the Ardennes, and Monique with schoolteachers, as part of a research on the cultural fractions of the middle class. When we began doing interviews with members of the upper class, things were very different. We could no longer use a similar interview template for all our interviewees. Also, the bourgeois are well-informed and they have a complete mastery of the register of language that allows them to play with distance and to hide whatever they want to hide. We had to consult books, newspaper articles, club directories, the *Bottin Mondain* [a French directory of prominent members of high society], the *Who's Who* – in short, everything we were able to access – before we even got to meet the interviewees. They had always been contacted by means of recommendations from people familiar to them. We thought it was necessary to be polite conversation partners, interested and pleasant intellectuals, to access these usually very closed-off family circles. In order to gain acceptance, we had to demonstrate the regard we had for our object of study, the family, the neighbourhood, the village, the club, the castle, interests and practices, and good taste. The members of the upper class enjoy being respected, and they like courtesy. We had to learn and understand these values and codes of class domination.

As we wrote in *Voyage en grande bourgeoisie* (1997), each interview involves an entire methodological architecture. For one of our first interviews, with an aristocrat connected to the Rothschild bank, we had to do extensive research to be able to make the best of the rare opportunity of doing such an interview. Monique stayed with him for 3 h. She recorded, took notes and asked all kinds of questions pertaining to his lifestyle, his family and changes in his social environment. This 78-year-old count showed documents and answered all questions openly, as if we were having a work meeting. The interviewees took an interest in exploring their own history. This special social rapport, established through mutual trust, was key to the success not only of the interviews but also of the research as a whole. In that case, for instance, the interviewee said at the end of the interview that he was considering writing his memoirs. Monique offered him to use the transcript of their long conversation. On the next day, both of us received an invitation to a family dinner in his Paris residence that turned out to be highly significant for our study. Around that table, there was a very famous writer, a prominent industrialist, a painter, a politician, a banker, etc. And the two of us, two academic intellectuals. All of a sudden, we had contacts that we would normally never had been able to make. We entered that world step by step; each interview was an opportunity to get recommended to new people.

It bears repeating, though, that to make fruitful interviews, we had to know as much as possible about that social universe. If we take the example of clubs or circles, if the interviewee understood that we were already well-informed about his

own affiliations, his functions, he would be more readily available to enrich our understanding of the importance of the close-knit sociability, the *entre-soi*, that goes on in these circles. Each time, we had to work extensively before the interviews, using all possible sources.

*What is the relation between interviews and ethnographic observations?*

Let's take the example of our work on fox-hunting. We travelled thousands of miles in forests, often in the rain, which enabled us to be invited in mansions, sometimes in castles too. The *grands bourgeois* opened their doors to us perhaps because they were impressed by our energy and our interest in this form of hunting whose rituals had not changed for centuries, and which is fascinating from an ethnological and sociological perspective. We spent time together and sometimes we even sang together! This proximity was necessary to understand how connections between members of the bourgeoisie develop, how it excludes people who are not like them, and according to which criteria it co-opts new members, including deep in the forest amidst dogs and wild animals.

Thanks to the combination of participant observation during receptions to which we were invited and long, in-depth interviews, we were able to understand the deeply solidary functioning of this social class at the top of society. Actually, it was thanks to this form of sociological entryism in a social class that was far from our own in terms of class relations, that we became ourselves aware of our very average position in social space, very average and dominated. We experienced this in our bodies and in the intimate symbolic violence that results from these relations of domination, which statistical studies alone cannot fully explain.

These personal experiences allowed us to get a better sense of the struggles faced by the *nouveaux riches*, be it the new bosses who made a colossal fortune in the first generation or millionaire lottery winners, in gaining acceptance in high society.

It should be noted that there is nothing easy about participant observation; it doesn't offer a direct or immediate understanding of the reality under observation. On the opposite, it requires an effort of constant construction and reconstruction of that reality, which can be done only on the condition that constant and systematic work is performed in parallel on other types of statistical data and on a variety of documents on this social milieu, which leaves a lot of traces in writing. Still, it is only by committing to the observation of details of everyday life, such as a house's furniture and decoration, or an individual's expressions, gestures and ways of doing things, that sociologically significant research can be achieved, and that insightful observation can replace superficial observation.

*Is it fair to say that you have acquired a degree of familiarity with that world?*

*Hasn't this put you in a delicate situation, being at least partially co-opted by your research object while working as rather critical researchers?*

In our case, we can't use the word familiarity! It's too strong. We were strangers, visitors and we remained just that. We have had friendly, sometimes very friendly empathy for some people, but it is impossible to bridge that much social distance, and attempting to do so was not our goal anyway. Also, when we had to write

about the findings of our investigations, we stopped all contact for several months in order to put distance between them and us so that we could keep our sociological reasoning abilities intact. It was at the time of writing that we integrated the findings of our observations and interviews as well as those from other sources of information concerning fortunes, properties, and the political and ideological stances we identified in papers and books.

The fact that many researchers were critical of our work was a rather positive thing, as it precisely forced us to be very careful to remain as scientific as possible when we reported on our investigative work. Their criticisms were actually more often on a moral level, “you are fascinated [by them]”, than on a scientific level. The importance of the fact that we were working as a couple is also worth noting. Simply being able to regularly discuss our interviews, our observations, our readings, and partial drafts of our books allows us to automatically distance ourselves from the object of these studies, and that has been very productive.

*In your books on chic neighbourhoods, fox-hunting or castles and their owners, for instance, you worked with a combination of ethnographic observation and interviews, whereas in the latest books, on the new generation of CEOs or on millionaire lottery winners, you're only working with interviews?*

Yes, the new CEOs with whom we worked for our 1999 book *Nouveaux patrons, nouvelles dynasties* worked all day and came back home very late at night, and there were very few opportunities for observation, much less participant observation. None of them invited us into their families or homes, and interviews always took place in their offices. They took part in far fewer society events than the older bosses and those were less varied. These new bosses were very busy making a fortune and expanding their companies. Admittedly, we had decided to work only on big bosses with working-class or lower-middle-class backgrounds, who had accumulated a colossal fortune within one generation. They had not formed dynasties – at least not yet. They were the first generation of a class group that had high levels of economic capital, but low levels of social and cultural capital. Their high-class bourgeois habitus had not been constructed yet, since that takes a lot of time. Yet our analysis was not only based on interviews. We also analysed data on their fortunes and companies.

As for the millionaire lottery winners (*Les millionnaires de la chance* 2010), on the contrary, we were able to conduct many observations in a variety of meetings organized by the Winners' department of the Française des jeux [the national lottery operator]. We attended educational workshops on financial and property investments, family and tax laws at the training centre located near the Française des jeux's IT site, in the area of Marseille. We were also invited to awarding ceremonies for winners; like those held for Legion of Honour recipients, they are rituals of consecration. We were also there for various functions held in Paris for the new millionaires to collectively learn how to handle their sudden wealth.

*Without disclaiming Marxism, you were inspired by Bourdieu's sociology?*

Michel was lucky enough to be Bourdieu's student when he was a professor of sociology in Lille. Pierre Bourdieu would have his students work with him on his



own sociological research, and to that end Michel and a dozen other students were invited to do an internship with him in his Parisian laboratory. Michel was the first to introduce Bourdieu to urban sociology. This was original, as the sociology of culture and education dominated then in Bourdieu's close circles. In the early 1970s, Michel began to link relations of exploitation and the dynamics of domination in geographic space, thus spatially objectivating divisions in social space.

Also, at the time we were members of the French communist party. We attended the training sessions that they offered us, but not the year-long one in Moscow... They had catchwords at the Party like the *grand capital* or "monopolistic state capitalism". We were very interested in the party's anti-capitalist posture, but it seemed to us that the social agents who own the means of production were not sufficiently personified, identified, and that this hindered understanding of the arbitrary functioning of this capitalist system, for which considerable efforts are made to make it appear "natural". Our goal then was already to show that this was a social construct that benefited a few and that could accordingly be demolished by all the others. It is fair to say that our analyses of the *grande bourgeoisie* reflect this early commitment. We have never given up on combining Marxism and Pierre Bourdieu's sociology.

*But, in your work, how do Bourdieu's sociology and Marxism relate?*

Pierre Bourdieu's sociology has most importantly helped us to analyse the transition from economic domination, which relates to one's place in relations of production, to symbolic domination, which allows the dominant to be recognized as legitimate. To do so, we took a keen interest in forms of capital other than just economic capital, which include cultural, social and symbolic capital. These different forms of capital cannot be separated; their combination is what creates excellence and social domination.

The concept of habitus also plays a fundamental role in our work, with Bourdieu's idea of an internalization, an embodiment even, of social determinisms by individuals. This gives us a better understanding of the processes of reproduction of the social order.

On the other hand, we believe that our very strong interest in Marxism has made us slightly critical about another key concept in Bourdieu's theoretical system – namely, the concept of field. That concept defines autonomous spaces in social activity, such as the political field, the economic field, the media field, etc. which in each case comes with a specific form of capital that acts as the driving force of each field's internal hierarchical structure. However, our analysis of the ruling class, whose members occupy the most dominant positions in each field, shows that this autonomy is, in a sense, weakened by the solidarity of the members of that class and their mobilization in defence of their class interests. In that social class, conflict of interest doesn't exist; it is left to the members of the middle class, whose professional capital is embedded into specific institutions. The oligarchy, on the other hand, is constantly synthesizing its interests, which know no border between the private and the public sphere, between the economy and politics, etc. At the other extremity of social space, blue-collar workers and rank-and-file employees, all those who have precarious jobs with little recognition, have little to do with this



autonomy of fields, which itself is increasingly threatened by the plundering of state resources by the richest, who massively refuse to contribute, for instance by paying taxes in proportion to their fortune, to social and national solidarity.

*For similar reasons, you don't identify class fractions within the bourgeoisie, you discuss it as a single class?*

Indeed, and the value of our work is that it shows that the dominant class is heterogeneous, but that despite that heterogeneity, it shows solidarity in defending its class interests. There are huge disparities in economic wealth within that class. If you take the list of the 500 biggest professional fortunes in France, you can see that Bernard Arnault, who has been number one for several years, has 400 times the amount of the person ranked 500. There are no disparities to such an extent in other social classes. In effect, the basis of membership in the dominant class under the capitalist system is holding the titles of ownership that enable the exploitation of others' labour. Thus, membership in this class rests on the radical and arbitrary antagonism of class relations. And all of its members are mobilized to defend the capitalist system in its current neo-liberal phase, which sees financialization seep into all areas of economic and social activity, including health, education and transport, which until recently still escaped the grip of capital. This generalized and globalized financialization has somehow been collectivizing the dominant class even more, by covering up its internal social differences with investment funds and collectivized portfolios.

This class mobilization involves the construction of family dynasties. Inscribing titles of ownership and the wealth and power that come with them within a long generational line allows for the reproduction of all these privileges within the same brotherhood of wealthy families, the same caste, the same dominant class. What is at stake is to make sure that nothing trickles down towards the other social classes. This is so true that we observed in our study on the new CEOs that only those whose wealth and company were embedded in a family dynasty could hope to be co-opted into the "ghettos of Gotha", of the grande bourgeoisie.

Although there are forms of competition and inequality within that oligarchy, which we could have chosen to analyse in their diversity and complementary, for political reasons in the noble sense of the term, we opted to use the tools of sociology to analyse the practical modalities of the solidarity and the surprising collectivism of a social class that hoards all wealth and power. Thanks to the new weapon of climate deregulation, this class has recently been waging an all-out war on the poor, who in the age of robots and digital and technological revolutions have become useless mouths to feed.

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