





Oliver Schlaudt

Habitus: the cultural primer

Four scenes

I

Susanne and Patrick enter the classroom. The air is stuffy and stale. Patrick grimaces: not a nice prospect of having to work here. Susanne opens the window without further ado, fresh air flows in. Patrick pauses. Why didn't he think of that himself? He knows how to open a window, he has done it a thousand times, and he also has his hands free. Still, he didn't do it, didn't even think about it.

II

Winter sets in early on the slopes of the Rocky Mountains. For the bighorn sheep, the food search becomes more difficult. Some animals will endure on the heights, but most of them will gradually drift into lower regions, fleeing the snow and cold winds. They follow a generation-old pattern. But they don't know it. The young animals follow the herd. In a few years, it will be they who initiate the annual migration.

Fig. 1

III

The group has made the descent into the narrow valley near the village of Langda in New Guinea. Some children are also part of the group. They look forward to romping around in the cool water while the adults look on the banks of the mountain stream for suitable stones for the manufacture of axes. The men quickly find one of the right size. They hold it, knock it with a large pebble. They are skeptical, someone shakes his head. The stone doesn't sound "right". They drop it and continue to work their way along the bank. The children have long since conquered the floods and are enjoying the cool reward.

Fig. 2

1 Young bighorn sheep in Badlands National Park, South Dakota, USA.



2 The search for and thorough examination of stones for the manufacture of ax heads in New Guinea.

IV

“Geopolitics”, Armand answers frankly when asked about his interests. He is 17 and his face is still childlike. The chairman of the selection committee asks about the warring parties in the Syrian conflict. It is clear from his reaction that Armand does not know the answer. “Beginner’s mistake”, the chairman will say after Armand has left the room, and laughs slyly. “We’ll take him”. Hamid might have known the answer. The images of the civil war on the television fascinate him and he follows the news carefully when his brother doesn’t zap to a different channel. But he doesn’t like sitting here in front of the strange jury. He often looks down and reacts cautiously. He is denied access to the elite university.

Habitus

The French education system is a mystery to foreigners because striving for the elite and the demand for equality have gone hand-in-hand for two hundred years. The country, according to the consensus, needs a strong elite of engineers, military personnel, administrative officials, and diplomats. The only prerequisite for such a career is talent, regardless of whether you come from a Parisian dynasty or grew up on a farm in the provinces. Everyone should have the same opportunity at all times, provided the task corresponds to their capabilities. The fact that reality looks completely different, not only in France, is perhaps not surprising, but it is also not easy to explain. What does a child from a “good” background have, for example, that makes it successful in a job interview? Not the parents’ money. There is also an “intangible” legacy. The sociologist Pierre Bourdieu called it “habitus” or “cultural capital.” This is a milieu-specific attitude, but it is perceived as an individual trait at school or in an interview, for example. Susanne is more assertive than Patrick, Armand more confident than Hamid.



3 “Culture = capital”, a light installation by Alfredo Jaar at the portico of the Braunschweig residential palace, 2016. Culture and capital have always had a tense relationship. The sociologist Pierre Bourdieu suggested that we view culture as a special kind of capital to explain the mode of operation and inheritance of inequalities in our society.

Pierre Bourdieu created the theory of cultural capital to understand how inequalities are inherited and reproduced over generations in modern, egalitarian societies. This theory can also be useful to better understand the beginnings of human culture. The behavioral sciences and psychology have long emphasized the importance of learning in the transmission of culture among many species of animals, especially humans. Cultural practices are passed on to the next generation not only through genes but also through cultural traditions. A distinction is made between different types of learning: mere imitation by the younger, conscious demonstration by the older, and finally the actual teaching, which is accompanied by corrective interventions and explanatory commentary. The habitus, on the other hand, refers to an even more fundamental way of learning. Neither the bighorn sheep nor the child of the Parisian upper class imitates an “action” previously observed from an elder. They do not experience the behavior of the elder as a planned, deliberate act in which a certain path is taken to achieve a purpose. They just join in, take the same path as previous generations, take part in conversations, develop a similar taste based on what their environment has to offer. The habitus is more like a basic mood in which the children bathe, which they soak up, and which they allow themselves to be carried along in. Bourdieu compared this to osmosis, the gradual seepage of a liquid through a fine-pored septum. At dinner, the children attend the conversations of their parents, learn what is important, how one talks about what, what one is at liberty to say, or what is forbidden. The children from New Guinea may not have paid much attention to what the older men were doing. Nevertheless, they will later know unthinkingly how and where to find the suitable raw materials for the manufacture of the stone ax heads. Human culture grows out of this cultural humus.

Fig. 3

Further reading

Bourdieu, P./Passeron, J.-C. 1979 *The inheritors: French students and their relation to culture*. Transl. by R. Nice (Chicago 1979).

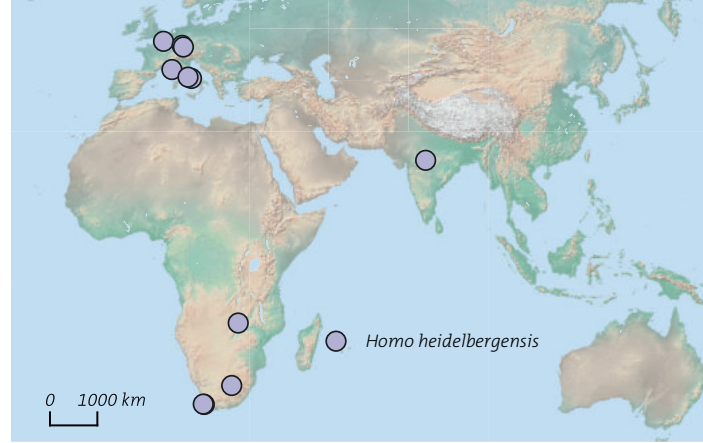
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Homo heidelbergensis

Profile



Discovery

A lower jaw bone discovered by Daniel Hartmann in Mauer near Heidelberg in 1907 is the first fossil of its kind.

Sites

Germany: Mauer, Steinheim.

Spain: Atapuerca.

Great Britain: Swanscombe.

France: Arago.

Hungary: Vértesszöllös.

Greece: Petralona.

Morocco: Thomas Quarry.

Israel: Zuttiyeh.

Ethiopia: Bodo.

Zambia: Kabwe.

South Africa: Elandsfontein.

Finds

Skull bones, lower jaw bone, arm and leg bones.

Age

600,000–200,000 years.

Brain size

circa 1,116–1,450 cm³.

Characteristics

Homo heidelbergensis differ anatomically only slightly from *Homo erectus* and *Homo sapiens neanderthalensis*, which is why researchers to this day are discussing whether this is actually a separate species. Some features on the jaw and teeth speak for this, while the anatomical similarity to the Neanderthals and the similarly large brain volume speak against it. Genetic evidence also suggests a close relationship to the Denisova people. It is unclear to what extent African finds from the same period can be assigned to *Homo heidelbergensis*.

Like the Neanderthals, *Homo heidelbergensis* produced a variety of tools. Stone tools and the famous wooden spears and throwing sticks from Schöningen are also assigned to *Homo heidelbergensis*. The diet of the approximately 1.60–1.75 m tall and 60–80 kg heavy *Homo heidelbergensis* was presumably based – as in all hunter-gatherer societies – on a high proportion of plants.



Lower jaw from Mauer near Heidelberg



Skull from Steinheim, Germany



Skull No. 5 from the cave Sima de los Huesos at Atapuerca, Spain



Skull from Bodo, Ethiopia