

The Meritocratic Legitimacy of Social Mobility: Social Reproduction and Methodological Individualism in the Moroccan Context

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.100800963>

Received: 29 August 2026; Accepted: 4 September 2026; Published: 22 September 2026

ABSTRACT

The Anderson paradox refers to the weak correlation observed between the level of educational attainment achieved and the social position ultimately occupied, independently of that of one's parents. Based on a documentary analysis and a critical review of the French sociological literature, this article examines the persistence of this paradox through two competing explanatory paradigms. Pierre Bourdieu explains it through social reproduction, operating through the intergenerational transmission of cultural capital. Raymond Boudon explains it through the aggregation of rational individual choices, which collectively produce substantial inequality of educational opportunities. Daniel Bertaux's earlier contribution, which distinguishes between structural mobility and net mobility, sheds light on the genesis of this opposition. A theoretical framework developed from Weber and Rosanvallon then makes it possible to recast this debate as an issue of political legitimacy specific to systems founded on the promise of meritocracy. These two paradigms are finally confronted with recent empirical evidence from Morocco, where social origin continues to shape the position attained despite educational expansion. The analysis shows that Bourdieu and Boudon converge in their empirical diagnosis while differing in the institutional reforms implied by each paradigm, before identifying two common limitations: the subjective perception of downward mobility and institutional legitimization strategies.

Keywords: social mobility; Anderson paradox; social reproduction; methodological individualism; meritocracy; political legitimacy; Morocco.

INTRODUCTION

In 1961, the American sociologist Charles Arnold Anderson identified a finding that would have a lasting impact on the sociology of education. He showed that the social status of sons depends very little on their relative level of education (Anderson, 1961). A higher educational qualification than that of the father therefore does not guarantee a higher social position. This finding was surprising because it contradicted a widely held belief in the post-war period. It was then assumed that the expansion of education would naturally produce greater social equality.

This paradox raises an issue that extends beyond the sociology of education alone. It concerns the very legitimacy of political systems that base their authority on the promise of meritocracy. This question was formulated at an early stage by the British sociologist Michael Young. In an essay published in 1958, he coined the term meritocracy to describe a future society governed by graduates alone (Young, 1958). His purpose was not to celebrate such a system. Rather, he sought to warn that a society based on educational merit could ultimately

exclude the working classes from political legitimacy altogether, depriving them even of the justification provided by social injustice.

In France, two major sociological responses have sought to explain this paradox. Pierre Bourdieu, together with Jean-Claude Passeron, proposed a macrosociological explanation. The school would not be a neutral space. Without explicitly stating so, it would value the culture of dominant groups, thereby transforming an inherited social advantage into apparent merit (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1964, 1970). Raymond Boudon proposed a different explanation, based on families' individual choices. Each family would assess the cost of education, the risk of failure, and compare its outcomes with those of a reference group. These choices, rational at the individual level, would collectively produce substantial inequality of educational opportunities, without requiring any intention of domination (Boudon, 1973).

This debate is often presented as an internal dispute within French sociology. We propose to read it differently. Bourdieu and Boudon actually share the same empirical observation. The expansion of education is not sufficient to produce the equality of social positions promised by the meritocratic discourse. They differ, however, over the mechanism responsible for this outcome, and therefore over the nature of the political reforms capable of addressing it. To analyse this divergence rigorously, rather than merely descriptively, we draw on a theoretical framework derived from both classical political sociology and contemporary political theory, built around the notion of legal-rational legitimacy and its continuous testing in democratic societies (Weber, 1921 / 1995, Rosanvallon, 2008). Within our analytical framework, the meritocratic promise is therefore understood as a specific source of legitimacy, whose credibility depends on the perceived correspondence between merit, educational trajectories, and social position.

This debate remains highly relevant today. In France, recent work by Luc Rouban shows that the subjective perception of one's own social success has become a determining factor in voting, more so than objective social position. According to Rouban, voters who perceive themselves as being at the bottom of the social hierarchy tend to vote overwhelmingly for protest parties, whereas those who perceive themselves as being at the top tend to support parties of government (Rouban, 2024). This interpretation confirms, at the electoral level, what Camille Peugny had already demonstrated several years earlier. Downward social mobility durably affects the partisan preferences of those concerned (Peugny, 2006). The Anderson paradox is therefore no longer merely an educational issue. It has become an issue of trust in political institutions.

This issue is not limited to France. Morocco offers a particularly instructive setting for examining the explanatory scope of these two theories beyond their context of origin. The historian Pierre Vermeren has shown that Moroccan educational meritocracy, which was genuinely present during the first decades following independence, subsequently became increasingly closed to the benefit of the heirs of already established elites (Vermeren, 2002). The most recent evidence confirms this persistence. A study based on microdata from the 2014 Moroccan census shows that social origin continues to exert an independent effect on the position attained, even after accounting for the level of education obtained (Housni and Aoujil, 2026a, 2026b). The High Commission for Planning reaches a similar conclusion. It identifies a relative rigidity of social status from one generation to the next, despite the general increase in educational attainment (Haut-Commissariat au Plan, 2021). The Anderson paradox thus finds, in an institutional context very different from that of France, empirical evidence that makes it possible to examine the explanatory scope of the mechanisms proposed by Bourdieu and Boudon in a social configuration different from that in which they were developed.

One final author completes this genealogy. As early as 1969, Daniel Bertaux distinguished between mobility resulting from structural transformations in society and mobility resulting from an actual exchange of positions between social categories (Bertaux, 1969). This distinction can be related to certain macrosociological concerns subsequently developed by Bourdieu, while net mobility bears affinities with the attention Boudon devoted to individual mechanisms of social mobility.

This article is structured around two research questions, one general and one specific. The general question is as follows: To what extent does the persistence of the Anderson paradox undermine the political legitimacy of systems founded on the promise of meritocracy? The specific question follows from this: Do Bourdieu's and

Boudon's competing paradigms, each in its own way, account for this persistence, and what is the explanatory scope of their respective mechanisms when confronted with the Moroccan case, and what different institutional responses do they imply?

The article is structured in eight parts. We first present a theoretical framework, developed from Weber and Rosanvallon, which defines meritocratic legitimacy as an object of analysis and provides the analytical grid systematically applied throughout the article. We then specify the methodology adopted. Next, we present the origins of the Anderson paradox and its implications for political legitimacy, followed by Bertaux's contribution. We then examine Bourdieu's and Boudon's respective models, each reread in light of the theoretical framework. Finally, we offer a critical discussion that examines the explanatory scope of the two paradigms in light of contemporary evidence from France and Morocco, before concluding with their shared limitations and the avenues for further research that they continue to open today.

Theoretical Framework: Meritocratic Legitimacy as an Object of Political Science

Before applying Bourdieu's and Boudon's theories to the Anderson paradox, it is necessary to clarify the conceptual tool that will serve as the analytical framework throughout this article, namely the notion of legitimacy. This concept belongs first and foremost to classical political theory. Max Weber distinguishes three possible forms of legitimation of power: traditional legitimacy, based on custom; charismatic legitimacy, based on the exceptional qualities of a leader; and legal-rational legitimacy, based on adherence to impersonal rules and procedures recognized as fair (Weber, 1921 / 1995). Within our analytical framework, the meritocratic promise can be related to this third form of legitimacy: it justifies a social position not on the basis of birth or individual charisma, but on adherence to a procedure regarded as neutral, namely educational selection based on merit.

This Weberian definition, however, remains insufficient for understanding what is at stake today, both in France and in Morocco. It describes a form of legitimacy that is maintained as long as the procedure is respected, without explaining what happens when that procedure, although apparently respected, ceases to produce the outcomes it promises. This is precisely the situation described by the Anderson paradox. The school continues to select according to formally egalitarian rules, but this selection no longer produces the expected degree of social equality.

To conceptualize this gap between procedural promise and social outcomes, the more recent work of Pierre Rosanvallon provides a useful complement. He shows that, in contemporary democracies, legitimacy based solely on majority voting is no longer sufficient to establish power on a durable basis. Power must now submit to additional tests of legitimacy, which he situates around three requirements: impartiality, which entails distancing decision-making from particular interests; reflexivity, which entails taking into account the plurality of perspectives on the common good; and proximity, which entails recognizing individual circumstances (Rosanvallon, 2008). This reasoning, developed in relation to electoral legitimacy, can be transposed, for analytical purposes, to meritocratic legitimacy. An educational institution that merely invokes its procedural neutrality without accounting for the inequalities in outcomes that it continues to produce faces a risk of legitimacy erosion similar to that of the purely majoritarian form of power described by Rosanvallon.

This theoretical framework makes it possible to formulate three precise questions that will structure the critical reading developed in the following sections. First, what source of legitimacy does each paradigm, Bourdieu's and Boudon's, implicitly attribute to the educational system? Second, what mechanism does each paradigm propose to explain the gap between the procedural promise and the social outcome observed? Third, what **test** of legitimation, in Rosanvallon's sense, does each paradigm implicitly call for in order to restore this legitimacy: a test concerning the criteria themselves, or a test concerning the conditions of access to these criteria?

This analytical grid will be systematically applied to Bourdieu, then to Boudon, and finally to the Moroccan case, so that the critical dimension of the article is no longer concentrated solely in the final discussion, but rather runs through each section from the outset.

Method

This article proposes a targeted critical literature review rather than an exhaustive systematic review. Its objective is to confront several competing theoretical paradigms, all developed from the French case, and to address the two research questions formulated above, one general and one specific.

The primary corpus first includes the foundational text of the paradox under study, Anderson's article published in 1961, which defines the object of the article itself rather than constituting one explanation among others. It then includes the three French responses to this paradox: Bertaux's article published in 1969, *Les Héritiers* and *La Reproduction* by Bourdieu and Passeron, as well as Boudon's *L'Inégalité des chances*, published in 1973. This second set of works constitutes the theoretical foundation of the article, entirely rooted in the French case.

The secondary corpus comprises three types of literature. The first concerns the sociological reception of the debate, including Lahire's critiques of the concept of habitus and Bouvier's work on methodological individualism. The second concerns contemporary political science literature on the consequences of blocked social mobility, including Peugny's and Rouban's work on electoral behaviour, as well as Pasquali's research on the reproduction of French elites. The third concerns an independent Moroccan body of literature, produced locally and published in indexed journals, incorporating Vermeren's historical work on elite formation, institutional data from the High Commission for Planning, and recent empirical studies by Housni and Aoujil.

From a typological perspective, this article falls within two complementary categories. It first corresponds to what Grant and Booth describe as a critical review, a format that does not seek to exhaustively catalogue a body of literature, but rather to construct an original argument from previously published works by confronting competing paradigms (Grant and Booth, 2009). It also follows the logic of the integrative literature review described by Torraco, which consists in articulating and synthesizing existing research in order to produce a new interpretation or an original analytical framework (Torraco, 2005, 2016). It is this second requirement that justifies the introduction, in this article, of an autonomous theoretical framework centred on meritocratic legitimacy, distinct from Bourdieu's and Boudon's theories themselves, and systematically applied to each of them.

The article adds a second analytical step to this foundation. It examines the explanatory scope of Bourdieu's and Boudon's paradigms when they are confronted with a social configuration different from the one in which they were developed. This confrontation is based on the independent Moroccan literature mentioned above. It therefore does not constitute an exhaustive empirical test of these theories, but rather a contextual examination of the explanatory mechanisms they propose. The aim is to identify the mechanisms that retain analytical relevance beyond the French case, as well as those whose effects may be reconfigured by the institutional, educational, and socio-economic characteristics of the Moroccan context. No primary data were collected for this article. Any reference to findings or data in the following sections therefore systematically refers to the empirical studies cited, rather than to original data produced by the authors of this article.

The Moroccan literature is used to document mechanisms of social mobility, access to occupational positions, and elite reproduction in the Moroccan context. It brings together historical studies on elite formation, empirical research on social and occupational trajectories, as well as statistical and institutional data that make it possible to identify their main characteristics. The body of literature is analysed on the basis of the explanatory mechanisms derived from Bourdieu's and Boudon's paradigms, in order to assess their scope within a social configuration different from that in which they were developed. This confrontation takes into account structural differences between the French and Moroccan contexts. The historical trajectory of the educational systems, the differentiated status of Arabic and French in educational pathways, the legacy of the colonial period and the Arabization of education, as well as the structure of the labour market and the prevalence of informal employment, constitute conditions that may modify the mechanisms through which social positions are produced, reproduced, and legitimized. These elements are therefore considered as contextual conditions of the analysis, rather than as mere descriptive differences between the two countries. This precaution helps avoid the mechanical transposition of theoretical categories developed from the French case.

The research design also has a limitation that needs to be made explicit. It claims neither the exhaustiveness of a systematic review nor the empirical generalization of findings derived from the Moroccan case alone. Its contribution lies in the reasoned confrontation of distinct theoretical traditions and in examining their capacity to account for social mechanisms within a configuration different from the context in which they were developed. The robustness of this approach therefore rests on the coherence of the corpus, the relevance of the works selected, and the distinction maintained between findings established by the literature reviewed and the analytical propositions developed in this article.

Anderson's Paradox as a Puzzle of Political Legitimacy

Charles Arnold Anderson published his article in 1961, in a specific context. Western countries had just experienced a major expansion of their educational systems. It was then widely assumed that this expansion would mechanically reduce social inequalities, since access to educational qualifications was becoming more widespread. Anderson reanalyzed an earlier survey on American social stratification. He observed that individuals' social mobility appeared to be almost independent of their level of education (Anderson, 1961). This finding ran counter to the prevailing theoretical assumptions of the time.

The paradox can be understood simply. An individual may obtain a higher educational qualification than his or her father without nevertheless attaining a higher social position. Conversely, an individual with a lower level of education than his or her father may experience upward mobility. Educational qualifications become a necessary condition for accessing certain positions, but cease to be a sufficient condition. The paradox thus highlights a gap between the increase in educational attainment and the social position actually attained. It can also be related to the phenomenon of educational inflation, whereby the wider diffusion of educational qualifications tends to reduce their differentiating power in the competition for social positions.

For the sociology of education, this finding raises a question of mechanism, whereas for political science, the issue is one of legitimacy. Modern democracies construct a substantial part of their political discourse around the idea of equality of opportunity through education. This discourse justifies inequalities in social position by explaining them as the result of individual merit rather than of an unjust social inheritance. If education no longer produces the promised equality of opportunity, the meritocratic discourse loses part of its justificatory force. This tension between the meritocratic ideal and the persistence of inequalities had already been formulated by Michael Young in *The Rise of the Meritocracy* (1958), in a prospective and critical rather than statistical register.

In France, this tension between the meritocratic promise and the actual blockage of mobility can be observed concretely in the functioning of elite higher education institutions. Paul Pasquali shows that, at each period of their history, these institutions have succeeded in transforming inherited social privilege into recognized merit through specific political choices, rather than through a simple automatic mechanism (Pasquali, 2021). He proposes the term *héritocratie* to designate this phenomenon. This work gives the Anderson paradox a highly concrete institutional relevance.

Morocco illustrates a tension of a similar kind, albeit in a different historical context. Pierre Vermeren shows that educational meritocracy was genuinely effective there during the first decades following independence, before gradually becoming more closed to the benefit of the heirs of already established elites (Vermeren, 2002). Recent empirical studies mobilized in this article suggest that this development remains perceptible: social origin continues to influence the social position attained in Morocco, even at comparable levels of education (Housni and Aoujil, 2026b). The Anderson paradox is therefore not necessarily a phenomenon specific to French sociology. It can be examined in very different institutional contexts, which invites us to consider it as a potentially more general problem of meritocratic legitimation, rather than as a mere national curiosity.

The Anderson paradox must therefore be understood at two levels. The first is empirical and educational. It concerns the statistical relationship between educational qualifications and social position. The second is political and normative. It concerns the capacity of meritocratic discourse to continue justifying the existing social order, even when the evidence may partially contradict it. It is this second level that political sociology allows us to address within our analytical framework, and that the classical sociological approaches of Bourdieu

and Boudon have primarily addressed through the mechanisms of reproduction and the differentiation of opportunities, rather than through the explicit question of political legitimacy.

Daniel Bertaux: A Foundational Analytical Distinction

Before Bourdieu and Boudon, another French sociologist laid the conceptual foundations that would structure much of the subsequent debate. In 1969, Daniel Bertaux published an article in the *Revue française de sociologie* entitled *Sur l'analyse des tables de mobilité sociale* (Bertaux, 1969). This text strongly criticized the dominant empiricism of the time. According to Bertaux, French sociology was then describing social mobility without a genuine overarching theoretical framework, relying instead on the accumulation of statistical data.

Bertaux proposed a simple but powerful distinction. He distinguished between two types of mobility observed within the same society. The first results from transformations in the social structure itself. When a society moves from an agricultural to an industrial economy, many individuals necessarily change social category simply because the former categories disappear. Bertaux referred to this phenomenon as structural mobility. The second results from exchanges between social categories that cannot be directly attributed to transformations in the employment structure. Bertaux referred to this phenomenon as net mobility or circulation mobility.

This distinction has implications that go beyond mere statistical description. It makes it possible to raise an essential question for our argument. A substantial share of the mobility observed in a society does not necessarily mean that the society is more open or more just. It may simply reflect economic transformations independent of individual merit. Conversely, the existence of net mobility is not, in itself, sufficient to establish the existence of genuine equality of opportunity. Bertaux thus shows that the analysis of mobility must distinguish between effects associated with transformations in the social structure and those resulting from exchanges between categories, rather than mechanically equating observed mobility with social openness (Bertaux, 1969).

This nuance remains illuminating for the examination of the Moroccan case. Over several decades, the country experienced considerable educational expansion, with secondary-school enrolment increasing from approximately 0.3 percent to 28 percent between 1955 and 1985 (Vermeren, 2002). Some of the social mobility observed in Morocco during this period may thus be related to structural transformations in the economy and the educational system, rather than being automatically interpreted as evidence of genuine meritocratic openness of social positions. Bertaux's distinction therefore calls for caution before interpreting a general increase in mobility as proof that a system has become more just.

This work plays a pivotal role in the intellectual history we are tracing. It provides a useful analytical foundation for understanding subsequent debates on the structural and individual determinants of social mobility. The distinction between transformations in the social structure and circulation between categories helps, in particular, to prepare the confrontation developed in the following sections between approaches that emphasize mechanisms of structural reproduction and those that place greater emphasis on the choices and constraints affecting individuals. It would nevertheless be excessive to present this as an opposition directly formulated by Bertaux between Bourdieu and Boudon: this connection is part of our own analytical reconstruction.

For the purposes of answering our general research question, Bertaux's contribution remains valuable. It reminds us that a social mobility figure, when used alone in public debate, can be misleading. An increase in upward mobility may reflect genuine social openness, but it may also reflect simple economic growth that mechanically creates new higher-level positions. This distinction remains fully relevant today, in France as well as in Morocco, when certain political discourses use mobility statistics to defend the legitimacy of the meritocratic system without always distinguishing between what results from structural transformation and what reflects a genuine equalization of opportunities.

Pierre Bourdieu: The Macrosocial Explanation Through Reproduction

Pierre Bourdieu, together with Jean-Claude Passeron, developed their response to the educational paradox as early as 1964, in a deliberately provocative book entitled *Les Héritiers (The Inheritors)* (Bourdieu and Passeron,

1964). The title already announces the central thesis. Students who succeed at university would not necessarily be the most talented. Rather, they would primarily be those who inherit, without being aware of it, an early familiarity with the scholarly culture valued by the school. This familiarity is transmitted within the family, even before children enter school, and gives them an invisible but decisive advantage.

In 1970, Bourdieu and Passeron developed this thesis further in *La Reproduction (Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture)* (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1970). They constructed a more general theory centred on the notion of symbolic violence. According to them, the school imposes a particular culture—that of dominant groups—by presenting it as universal and neutral. This imposition works all the more effectively because it remains concealed. Students who fail eventually internalize their failure as a personal lack of ability, without perceiving that they were initially disadvantaged by a system structured around the cultural codes of another social class. This interpretation is consistent with the analyses developed in *La Reproduction*, in which the apparent neutrality of schooling contributes precisely to legitimizing socially constituted differences.

Applying the Theoretical Framework to Bourdieu

Let us return here to the first question raised by our theoretical framework. What form of legitimation can be associated with the functioning of the educational system described by Bourdieu? Within our analytical framework, this functioning can be related to procedural legitimation: the school presents itself as a neutral and impersonal institution, applying common rules and examinations to students. This presentation can be considered in relation to legal-rational legitimacy in Weber's sense, without attributing to Bourdieu an explicit use of this typology (Weber, 1921 / 1995). Yet, according to Bourdieu, this claim is largely fictitious. The procedure is neutral only in appearance, since it values cultural competencies that are not equally distributed among students from the outset. Bourdieu's analysis thus focuses less on the formal legitimacy of the procedure than on the social conditions that make possible its claim to impartiality.

The second question raised by the theoretical framework concerns the mechanism that explains the gap between the procedural promise and the observed social outcome. For Bourdieu, this mechanism is cultural and operates upstream of schooling itself. It does not involve intentional discrimination on the part of teachers, but rather a structural correspondence between the implicit expectations of the educational institution and dispositions already acquired within certain families, even before schooling begins. It is this invisible correspondence that produces social selection under the guise of educational selection. Educational selection thus appears as the institutional outcome of prior cultural inequalities, rather than primarily as the result of an explicit intention to discriminate.

The third question concerns what test of legitimation this paradigm calls for, in Rosanvallon's sense, in order to restore meritocratic legitimacy. For Bourdieu, the necessary test concerns the selection criteria themselves, rather than merely the conditions of access to those criteria. Within our analytical framework, this interpretation leads us to envisage an institutional response aimed at making visible and then correcting the cultural biases embedded in educational examinations, rather than merely providing financial assistance to disadvantaged families so that they can better prepare for them. The issue, therefore, is to reduce the gap between the formal equality of the procedure and the social inequalities embodied in the concrete conditions of achievement.

Contemporary Extensions in France and Morocco

Bourdieu extended this line of analysis in a different register with *La Distinction*, published in 1979 (Bourdieu, 1979). He showed that cultural tastes, aesthetic preferences, and lifestyles are never purely individual. They reflect individuals' social positions and themselves function as markers of social distinction. This work introduced the notion of habitus, which became central to his subsequent work. Habitus refers to a set of durable dispositions, acquired during childhood, that unconsciously shape individuals' behaviours, tastes, and choices throughout their lives.

This interpretation finds a highly concrete institutional counterpart in Paul Pasquali's more recent work on French elite higher education institutions. He shows that these institutions have experienced more than a century

of political controversies, from the Third Republic to the announced abolition of the *École nationale d'administration*, without ever losing their function of social reproduction (Pasquali, 2021). He proposes the concept of *héritocratie* to describe this mechanism, which consists in transforming inherited privilege into recognized merit through specific political and institutional choices, rather than through a simple automatic process of cultural determinism. This extension converges with our theoretical framework by showing that meritocratic legitimation depends not only on the characteristics of individuals, but also on the institutions and criteria through which social positions are allocated.

The Moroccan case makes it possible to observe a relatively similar mechanism, albeit in a different historical context. Pierre Vermeren shows that Moroccan elite higher education institutions, particularly those modelled on the French system, initially enabled genuine upward social mobility during the first decades following independence. This openness subsequently narrowed, to the benefit of the heirs of already established elites, through a combination of institutional and linguistic barriers (Vermeren, 2002). This finding can be related to the thesis of cultural reproduction, without assuming that the mechanisms are identical in the two contexts. The early mastery of certain linguistic and cultural codes, transmitted within the family, continues to play a decisive role in access to elite educational tracks, well beyond the officially proclaimed principle of academic merit. In both the French and Moroccan contexts, this configuration makes it possible to question the capacity of educational institutions to satisfy the test of meritocratic legitimation: when formally common criteria remain associated with socially differentiated resources, the promise of selection based on merit may be weakened.

Limitations and Integrated Critical Discussion

Bourdieu's theory has nevertheless been the subject of significant criticism, which must be taken seriously in order to maintain a balanced discussion. Bernard Lahire criticizes him for having constructed the notion of *habitus* on the basis of observations of relatively undifferentiated societies, such as the Kabyle society studied by Bourdieu at the beginning of his career. According to Lahire, this model becomes less relevant in highly differentiated societies, where the same individual moves across highly diverse contexts and develops dispositions that may sometimes be contradictory rather than a single, coherent *habitus* (Lahire, 1998). Applied to our theoretical framework, this criticism suggests that the mechanism identified by Bourdieu, however real it may be, may not, by itself, necessarily be sufficient to account for how individuals today experience the gap between the meritocratic promise and the social position they actually attain, insofar as their experiences and dispositions may be plural and differentiated.

Other criticisms also call for broadening the scope of the analysis by taking into account other dimensions of social differentiation, such as gender, geographical origin, or contemporary changes in the conditions of access to educational resources. These limitations do not invalidate the central thesis of social reproduction, but they suggest that it should be supplemented and contextualized rather than applied as such to different social configurations.

Despite these limitations, Bourdieu's theory provides decisive insight into our general research question. It shows that the persistence of the Anderson paradox is not merely a technical dysfunction of the educational system. It can be interpreted as a weakening of meritocratic legitimacy when the educational procedure, while presenting itself as impartial, continues to produce strongly differentiated outcomes according to individuals' social and cultural resources. This interpretation logically calls for a strong institutional response addressing the selection criteria themselves. It is precisely on this point that Raymond Boudon's theory will propose a very different direction, which we examine in the following section.

Raymond Boudon: The Microsocial Explanation Through Methodological Individualism

Raymond Boudon proposes a substantially different interpretation of the same paradox. He develops it primarily in his 1973 book, *L'Inégalité des chances*, subtitled *La mobilité sociale dans les sociétés industrielles* (Boudon, 1973). Unlike Bourdieu, Boudon adopts an approach that takes individuals and their choices as the starting point for sociological explanation. He begins with the individual, considered the basic unit of sociological explanation. This is what is known as methodological individualism.

His theory unfolds in two stages. The first explains inequality of educational opportunities. Boudon starts from a simple observation. At each stage of their child's educational trajectory, each family must decide whether the child should pursue long and prestigious studies or take a shorter educational path. This decision depends on three elements: the financial cost of education, the risk of failing to obtain the targeted qualification, and the level of achievement considered satisfactory in relation to the family's reference group. Each family therefore acts rationally given its situation and the information available to it. Yet the aggregation of these individual choices, all rational when considered separately, collectively produces substantial inequality of educational opportunities. Boudon refers to this phenomenon as a *perverse effect of aggregation*.

The second stage of the theory explains social mobility itself. Boudon constructs a simulated model with several social classes and several educational levels. He shows that even in a perfectly meritocratic system, in which only educational qualifications determine the social position attained, inequality of educational opportunities is sufficient by itself to produce substantial inequality of social destinies. A child from a privileged background thus retains a much higher probability of attaining a high social position, not because the system directly favours that child, but because he or she moves more easily through each stage of the educational trajectory.

Applying the Theoretical Framework to Boudon

Let us return to the first question of our theoretical framework. What form of legitimation can be associated with the educational system in Boudon's model? Unlike Bourdieu, Boudon does not make a critique of the procedural neutrality of the school the central mechanism of his explanation. In his model, the system can be perfectly meritocratic, in the sense that the formal selection rules are common to all individuals, without this being sufficient to correct inequality of social destinies (Weber, 1921 / 1995). Within our analytical framework, the legitimacy of the procedure is therefore not directly called into question: it is the inequality of the conditions under which individuals can access and participate in this procedure that becomes problematic.

The second question concerns the mechanism that explains the gap between the procedural promise and the observed social outcome. For Boudon, this mechanism is neither hidden nor cultural. It results from the aggregation of rational individual choices made in differentiated social situations, as well as from the structural effects resulting from this aggregation. Inequality of social destinies therefore does not require assuming an intention of domination on the part of the educational institution: it may emerge from rational individual decisions, given the costs, risks, and anticipated benefits, while collectively producing unequal outcomes.

The third question concerns what test of legitimation, in Rosanvallon's sense, this paradigm calls for in order to restore meritocratic legitimacy. Here, the answer differs significantly from Bourdieu's. The necessary test does not concern the selection criteria themselves, but rather the concrete conditions under which individuals can access educational pathways that enable them to meet these criteria. It concerns, in particular, the conditions under which families assess the costs and risks of education, that is, the information available to them and the economic incentives offered to disadvantaged groups. Within our analytical framework, this interpretation therefore leads us to envisage an institutional response aimed at reducing the economic and informational costs associated with long educational trajectories, rather than transforming the educational criteria themselves.

Contemporary Extensions in France and Morocco

This approach has received substantial critical attention, which must be presented accurately in order to maintain a balanced discussion. Raymond Boudon himself criticized the reproduction theory for a form of reasoning resembling a conspiracy theory, as if social forces operated unbeknownst to actors in order to maintain the opposition between the dominant and dominated classes. According to him, this type of explanation too readily attributes a hidden intention to a system without ever empirically verifying the existence of such an intention. In turn, Bourdieu and other critics of methodological individualism criticized Boudon for an overly utilitarian conception of the social actor, which risks reducing the diversity of the determinants of action to a logic of calculating costs and benefits resembling the *homo economicus* of classical economic theories.

A more recent reading nevertheless makes it possible to qualify this frontal opposition. Alban Bouvier points out that Boudon himself acknowledged an important merit in Bourdieu and Passeron. According to Boudon,

they raised a question that Sorokin had never really addressed, namely the microsociological foundations of the data obtained through macrosociological analysis of mobility (Bouvier, 2020). This mutual recognition shows that the dispute, however intense it may have been, should not be caricatured as a total and irreconcilable opposition between the two authors. Rather, it makes it possible to consider that the two approaches emphasize distinct levels at which inequalities are produced: the mechanisms of social and cultural reproduction in Bourdieu, and individual choices and their aggregation effects in Boudon.

The Boudonian model retains heuristic relevance for examining the Moroccan case. Recent data on occupational mobility in Morocco suggest the existence of a mechanism compatible with certain elements of the Boudonian analysis. Education constitutes a genuine pathway to advantaged occupational positions, but social origin continues to exert an independent effect, even at comparable levels of education (Housni and Aoujil, 2026b). This finding does not, however, make it possible on its own to establish that the Boudonian mechanism is confirmed in the Moroccan context. Rather, it invites us to examine the extent to which the costs, risks, and information associated with educational choices may contribute to producing differentiated trajectories. Within this framework, the test of legitimation that our analytical framework associates with the Boudonian interpretation concerns the economic and informational incentives available to the least advantaged Moroccan families, rather than the formal criteria governing access to elite educational tracks.

Limitations and Integrated Critical Discussion

Boudon's model has limitations that should be acknowledged in order to maintain rigour. His simulated model relies on parameters that are partly arbitrary, even though these are based on actual empirical surveys. It also assumes that families are capable of assessing relatively accurately the costs and risks of further education, which remains a strong assumption, particularly in contexts where information about employment opportunities circulates unevenly across social groups, as may be observed in certain Moroccan regions that are less well served by educational guidance infrastructure.

Applied to our theoretical framework, this limitation suggests that the test of legitimation identified for Boudon, centred on information and incentives, can only be sufficient if we assume a relatively homogeneous form of rationality among families. Yet this assumption is itself questionable, which echoes, through a different route, the criticism already formulated regarding Bourdieu and the need to take greater account of the diversity of individual experiences.

Despite these limitations, Boudon's theory provides an essential complementary perspective on our general research question. It shows that the persistence of the Anderson paradox does not require a hidden mechanism of domination to be explained, nor even a defect in procedural legitimacy in the strict sense. It may result from a simple mismatch between two social structures that evolve autonomously, under the influence of rational individual choices. This interpretation calls for an institutional response different from that associated with Bourdieu, centred on the economic and informational incentives available to families, rather than on a reformulation of the educational criteria themselves.

Critical Discussion: A Single Legitimacy Puzzle, Two Institutional Responses

Bourdieu and Boudon share the same starting point. Both observe that the expansion of education does not

produce the social equality it promised. On this empirical diagnosis, their work largely converges, which makes it possible to read them together rather than as two isolated bodies of thought. Their disagreement lies elsewhere, in the nature of the mechanism responsible for this outcome, and it is this divergence that has direct implications for our broader research question.

For Bourdieu, the mechanism is cultural and structural. The school reproduces social positions because it implicitly values the cultural codes of groups that are already dominant. For Boudon, the mechanism is individual and rational. The school reproduces social positions because families situated in different circumstances make different choices, each of them equally rational, whose aggregation produces substantial collective inequality.

Neither mechanism requires assuming a conscious intention to dominate, yet both lead to a similar outcome: an educational system unable to fulfil its meritocratic promise. The difference therefore lies less in their diagnosis of persistent inequalities than in the level at which each locates the mechanisms that contribute to producing them.

This convergence in diagnosis, combined with this divergence in mechanism, has direct implications for public policy. If Bourdieu's interpretation is adopted, the relevant reform must address the very criteria governing educational selection in order to reduce the weight of inherited cultural codes. This seems to be illustrated, in reverse, by the recurrent debate over the abolition of the *École nationale d'administration* and the reform of the French *grandes écoles*, where the issue raised by reformers is indeed to change recruitment criteria rather than merely reduce their cost (Pasquali, 2021). If Boudon's interpretation is adopted, the relevant reform should instead address the economic incentives available to families by reducing the actual cost and perceived risk of prolonged education for disadvantaged groups, without necessarily transforming educational content itself. These two orientations should not, however, be understood as the explicit and exclusive prescriptions of the two authors, but rather as institutional implications that our analytical framework makes it possible to derive from the mechanisms they emphasize.

The examination of the Moroccan case makes it possible to test the robustness of these two interpretations in an institutional context very different from that in which they were developed. These distinct historical trajectories nevertheless invite us not to assume that the mechanisms at work are identical in the two countries. In France, social reproduction is observed within long-established institutions that have been stabilized for more than a century, where meritocratic legitimacy has had time to become deeply embedded in public discourse before being called into question (Pasquali, 2021). In Morocco, educational meritocracy experienced a genuinely open period during the first decades following independence, before closing more rapidly under the combined effect of institutional and linguistic barriers (Vermeren, 2002). Yet in both cases, the literature reviewed indicates that social origin continues to exert an independent effect on the position attained, even at comparable levels of educational attainment (Housni and Aoujil, 2026b). This empirical convergence, despite very different institutional histories, suggests that Anderson's paradox does not depend on any particular context. Rather, it appears to constitute a more general structural tension between the meritocratic promise and the actual functioning of any stratified society.

This tension has measurable political consequences, directly addressing our broader question concerning legitimacy. In France, Camille Peugny showed that downward social mobility durably alters the partisan preferences of those affected (Peugny, 2006). More recent studies further qualify this finding. Luc Rouban shows that it is less objective social position than the subjective perception of one's own success that currently shapes voting behaviour, with voters who perceive themselves as being at the bottom of the social ladder turning toward protest parties, regardless of their actual occupational category (Rouban, 2024). This distinction is important for our argument: the weakening of meritocratic legitimacy depends not only on the objective existence of a gap between educational attainment and social position, but also on how this gap is perceived and politically interpreted.

This shift from objective position to subjective perception constitutes a contribution that neither Bourdieu nor Boudon fully anticipated. Their models explain well the production of inequality of opportunity. They are less able to explain how this inequality is experienced, interpreted, and transformed into political judgement by individuals themselves. This subjective dimension leads us to broaden the discussion toward mechanisms of status perception and social comparison, which make it possible to specify what the two paradigms capture less directly.

It is precisely on this point that Bernard Lahire's critique remains highly relevant to our discussion. Lahire criticizes Bourdieu for conceptualizing habitus as a relatively unified system of dispositions suited to poorly differentiated societies, whereas contemporary societies produce individuals shaped by plural and sometimes contradictory experiences (Lahire, 1998). This observation indirectly sheds light on Rouban's finding. If individuals no longer respond homogeneously according to their objective social position alone, but rather according to more individualized and fragmented perceptions of their own trajectories, then the two major

paradigms inherited from the 1970s need to be complemented by a more fine-grained analysis of these individual perceptions, without being discarded.

A second theoretical gap should be identified. Neither Bourdieu nor Boudon paid much attention to the way institutions themselves actively construct their meritocratic legitimacy, independently of their actual functioning. This is the aspect developed by Pasquali, who shows that, at each critical period in their history, the French *grandes écoles* have succeeded in reforming their discourse and certain access criteria in order to preserve their legitimacy, without relinquishing their function of social reproduction (Pasquali, 2021). This work suggests a line of research that neither reproduction theory nor methodological individualism has fully explored: institutional strategies of legitimation, distinct both from unconscious cultural mechanisms and from rational individual choices.

Ultimately, the confrontation between these two paradigms does not result in the victory of one over the other. It leads instead to a more nuanced conclusion that directly addresses our broader research question. The persistence of Anderson's paradox does indeed weaken the political legitimacy of systems founded on the meritocratic promise, in France as in Morocco, but this weakening takes different forms depending on the paradigm adopted. For Bourdieu, it operates through a critique of the institutions' claimed neutrality. For Boudon, it operates through highlighting the differentiated social conditions under which individuals can actually benefit from this procedure. These two critiques are not mutually exclusive. They illuminate complementary dimensions of the same political problem, which recent research, particularly on the subjective perception of downward mobility and on institutional strategies of legitimation, now invites us to examine jointly in greater depth. This difference does not, however, mean that one paradigm is intrinsically more valid than the other. Rather, it suggests that their analytical scope may vary according to the institutional, educational, and socio-economic configuration under consideration, and that their articulation may provide a more comprehensive understanding of the mechanisms of social reproduction and the weakening of meritocratic legitimacy.

CONCLUSION AND PERSPECTIVES

This article started from two research questions. The broader question concerned the weakening of the political legitimacy of systems founded on the meritocratic promise as a result of the persistence of Anderson's paradox. The specific question concerned the capacity of Bourdieu's and Boudon's paradigms to account for this persistence, and the explanatory scope of the mechanisms they propose when confronted with the Moroccan case, together with the different institutional responses that can be derived from each interpretation.

To address these two questions, the article drew on a theoretical framework constructed from Weber and Rosanvallon, distinguishing procedural legitimacy from its continuous testing (Weber, 1921/1995; Rosanvallon, 2008). This framework made it possible to systematically examine three dimensions in each author's approach: the source of legitimacy attributed to the educational system, the mechanism responsible for the gap between promise and outcome, and the institutional test of legitimation required to restore that legitimacy.

Regarding the broader question, our analysis leads to a nuanced answer. Anderson's paradox does not weaken meritocratic legitimacy in a uniform manner. Rather, it erodes it in two distinct ways, depending on whether a structural or an individualistic interpretation of the mechanism at work is adopted. In both cases, however, the recent literature reviewed in this article indicates that social origin continues to exert an independent effect on the position attained, even at comparable levels of educational attainment (Housni and Aoujil, 2026b). This convergent empirical finding, across two very different institutional contexts, suggests that the tension between the meritocratic promise and social reproduction constitutes a structural problem of stratified societies rather than a simple anomaly specific to any one country. This observation, when considered alongside studies focusing on the French context, suggests that the tension between the meritocratic promise and social reproduction may extend beyond any particular national context, while taking differentiated forms according to institutional and socio-economic configurations.

Regarding the specific question, our discussion has shown that Bourdieu and Boudon provide complementary rather than strictly competing explanations when reread through the same analytical framework. Bourdieu

explains why schools continue to reproduce social positions despite their apparent openness by revealing the hidden weight of inherited cultural codes, which calls for a legitimation test focused on the criteria themselves. Boudon explains how this reproduction can occur without any intention of domination, through the simple aggregation of rational but socially differentiated individual choices, which calls for a legitimation test focused on the incentives offered to families. These two interpretations therefore make it possible to identify distinct institutional orientations, without presenting them as explicit and exclusive prescriptions of the two authors.

Our discussion has also highlighted two limitations common to both paradigms, opening up avenues for research in contemporary political sociology. The first concerns the subjective perception of downward mobility. Recent studies show that it is no longer only objective social position, but also how individuals perceive their own trajectories, that shapes political behaviour today (Rouban, 2024). The frameworks developed by Bourdieu and Boudon account less directly for this subjective dimension, and our theoretical framework itself, centred on criteria and incentives, is not sufficient to explain it fully. The second limitation concerns institutional strategies of legitimation, which are distinct both from unconscious cultural mechanisms and from rational individual choices, and which more recent studies have only begun to document systematically (Pasquali, 2021).

This article has limitations that should be clearly acknowledged. The examination of the Moroccan case remains based on an independent secondary and institutional literature rather than on original empirical research conducted directly in the field according to a protocol specifically designed for this article. Future research could therefore compare directly comparable social mobility data from the two countries, based on surveys constructed around harmonized occupational categories, in order to examine more rigorously, through a genuinely comparative approach, the broader applicability of Anderson's paradox beyond the French case.

A second avenue of research follows directly from the theoretical framework proposed here. It would consist in examining more systematically, from a comparative political sociology perspective, how institutions responsible for elite formation, whether the French *grandes écoles* or their Moroccan counterparts, concretely undergo the legitimation tests described by Rosanvallon, impartiality, reflexivity, and proximity, in response to the criticisms directed at them, and in relation to their actual institutional functioning. This avenue would make it possible to move beyond the opposition between cultural and individualistic explanations by reintroducing the strategic action of institutions themselves as a distinct object of study.

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