

Society Made Visible – on the Cultural Sociology of Pierre Bourdieu

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In this article the cultural sociology of Pierre Bourdieu, one of the most eminent contemporary French sociologists, is reviewed and discussed. Originally a structuralist anthropologist, Bourdieu has developed a critical sociology of cultural forms. His methodological point of view is at one and the same time anti-functional, anti-empiricist and anti-subjectivist. The cultural forms of the practices of everyday life cannot be reduced to 'needs' of the individual any more than to the functional imperatives of the collectivity. They take the form of irreducible symbolic expressions, the meaning of which are not directly apparent to the subjects. Yet the subjects are not determined by the collective institutions in their practices. The central concept, 'habitus', aims at combining the subjective and the culturally determined collective elements in these practices. The substantial problematic of Bourdieu's sociology is to show how the cultural forms are expressions of the structure of domination in society. The most flamboyant realization of this problematic is his recent work *La Distinction*, which makes visible the system of class domination in modern France. It is a systematic study of the cultural forms in which this domination is revealed in the way of life of different classes and class fractions. This article aims to locate both Bourdieu's methodology and his interpretation of the cultural forms in modern France in the French intellectual scene as well as in the context of the sociology of culture in general.

Introduction

Pierre Bourdieu is a contemporary French sociologist little known in the Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian sociological communities. The actuality of Bourdieu's view of society to contemporary sociological thought lies in its ability to avoid the empirically empty theoretical impasses characteristic of the materialistic ambitions of the post-positivistic era, while being faithful to the epistemological critique of empiricist questionnaire sociology.

In his most explicit attack on empiricist sociology (1968), *Le métier de sociologue* (The profession of the sociologist, written in collaboration with J.-C. Passeron and J.-C. Chamboredon), Bourdieu denounces the manner in which positivistic questionnaire sociology takes at face value the statistical patterns of survey responses, which in fact are only representations of the arbitrary theoretical constructions of the sociologist himself. Social facts are produced by the scientists, but they can be *real* facts only on the condition that they correspond to the real underlying structure

of society, and on the condition that the sociologist is aware of the social determination of his concepts, categories and classifications. In this critique, Bourdieu comes close to the arguments characteristic of the anti-positivistic upheaval by young Marxists and inheritors of the critical sociologies, both of the American (Mills, Gouldner) and German varieties (for example Habermas). His advantage is that from the outset he requires that his social facts are *meaningful* to the people he studies. The meanings that people attach to their practices are not always objectively correct, however, and it is exactly the (critical) task of sociology to reveal the contradictions between the subjective meanings (which usually are those professed by the 'official' society) and the implicit objective meanings that structure the life style of different social groups and explain their inherent 'logic'. In other words, Bourdieu takes seriously the notion of culture, and it is for this reason that his work is relevant for a wide range of critical research on the way of life, consumption patterns, life-style, social consciousness, and even on the various forms of political practices.

Contrary to his British counterparts, the Birmingham school of cultural sociology (which adopts a 'wide' definition of culture as a totality of meaningful practices constituting a way of life), Bourdieu defines culture narrowly as 'the best that has been thought and said, regarded as the summits of achieved civilization' (Hall 1980:59). He adds one crucial qualification, however: that which is *defined* as such by the *dominant classes*. Bourdieu has no great difficulty operationalizing this definition in works of art, modes of dressing or practices of leisure. His interest revolves around the question: what determines this appreciation and how is it expressed and lived among the different sections of the dominating classes and among the dominated popular classes?

Bourdieu, originally an anthropologist of the structuralist persuasion, became known in the early 1960s for his works on Algeria (Bourdieu 1961, 1978, 1964; Bourdieu *et al.* 1964). Since then his concerns have been oriented towards the cultural life of modern France. His books on education have been translated into English (Bourdieu & Passeron 1964, 1970), but his very interesting works on photography (Bourdieu *et al.* 1965) and the appreciation of art (Bourdieu & Darbel 1966) still remain beyond the linguistic barrier as far as English-reading audiences are concerned. His nomination to College de France last year (1981) is a sign of the esteem enjoyed by his thinking and research in France today, and the publication of his chef-d'oeuvre *La distinction - critique sociale du jugement* (1979) in English this year is a sign of increasing interest abroad. Several of his books have appeared in Germany, Italy, Hungary, and in Latin America. Parts of *La reproduction* have even appeared in a Swedish and a Danish anthology (1977), which also includes the editors' (Boel Berner, Staf Callewaert, Henning Silberbrandt) clarifying introductions to Bourdieu's sociology of education and to the debates around it.

In the following I intend to review the whole of Bourdieu's cultural sociology, aiming to place it in a theoretical context and to draw out its implications in view of studies of contemporary cultural studies.

The problematique

The diversity of Bourdieu's interests and fields of empirical research may seem so

extravagant as to avert the suspicious reader from a search for a common and integrating problematic in his thinking. What could the kinship system in an Algerian village have to do with the educational system, the style of dressing, dietary patterns, photography or artistic tastes in modern France? One might at least expect that a problematic integrating such a dispersed set of subjects would be extremely formalistic and void of content. Here Bourdieu takes us by surprise. His sociology is more consistent throughout its development from the early works to the most recent ones than is usually the case in the working out of complex theoretical ideas. The same themes keep returning to his texts, to the point of even unnecessary repetition, but always with a substance treated in the context of new material.

One could say that Bourdieu has both a substantial problematic and a methodological point of view. His problematic consists in revealing and bringing to light the hidden forms of domination that are consciously and unconsciously reproduced in everyday life. The kinship system in Algeria is one such form. It is a culturally accepted and objectively existing institution that is closely associated with patterns of domination in Algerian society (1961, 1972). Far from being an innocent but unconscious *function* of the 'total' society, it is a system of conventions that are constantly being used as instruments in a competition for power, prestige and economic gains. In other words, the kinship pattern *means* something to the villagers as well as *defines the meaning* of their actions for others. This is the first clue to Bourdieu's methodological point of view.

The second clue to Bourdieu's methodology is also closely associated with his substantial problematic. From the sociology of Algeria he moved to the study of higher education in France (Bourdieu & Passeron 1964, 1970). Education is the area in which the ideology of equality is most prominently expressed in France, in the tradition of a comprehensive state school system. Formally providing an equal opportunity to all, the system camouflages the thousands of ways in which school reproduces the class differences, founded in primary 'socialization', in the ideology of 'talent'. The differential achievements in education are socially attributed to the innate qualities of the students, while in reality these differences reflect the domination of one class by another. The important point is not only that the school system exercises the function of selection of students to positions with differential cultural, economic and status advantages. It is also the mechanism which individualizes the merits for success and the blame for failure, while, furthermore, it produces an aura of legitimacy to the values, tastes and life-style of the dominant classes. Thus also the school system, the very institution *par excellence* symbolizing the ideology of equality, is in fact a cultural instrument of class domination.

The school generates 'cultural capital' which can be utilized in all areas of life, in artistic enjoyment as well as in the cultural forms of everyday life (style). It is a capital which can be accumulated in aesthetic and cognitive practices which are impossible without an original 'investment' of time and effort spent in formal education. But as in economic life, the returns on cultural capital are not guaranteed and do not accumulate without success in competition. There is a constant struggle for the validity of cultural assets and currencies in the contestation for 'distinction' in cultural styles. Those with the largest pools of cultural capital, the intellectuals,

constantly create new tastes, styles and aesthetic values and claim legitimacy for them. The less cultured groups are quick to adopt these cultural forms, but their very generalization leads to a lack of rarity and thus to a loss of value (Bourdieu 1979:249–255).

It is this incessantly changing pattern of cultural forms of domination, competition for power and prestige that constitutes the problematic of Bourdieu's sociology. It is a critical programme, astoundingly revealing a struggle between social groups where we might least expect it: in the practice of photography, attendance of art museums, musical tastes, leisure patterns, selection of foods on the dinner table, clothes, sports, etc. In all these areas the cultural patterns reveal an expression of a contest for position, a distinction from others as a possessor of taste – and of power.

In regard to his methodological position it is important to underline that in his analysis of the cultural system of society it is not only a structure of *given* meanings, it is also a field of action. Culture is a meaning structure, but it is produced, reproduced and *used* by acting *subjects*.

Model of society

Bourdieu is not a model builder. His sociology is as plastic as it is inspiring. His style is complex, literary, and difficult; his flows of argument are polycentric, and polyvalent, constantly transgressing the boundaries between statistical description, ethnological observation and philosophical analysis. He is almost arrogant in taking liberties to adopt concepts, analogies and allegories from different and opposing traditions of sociological theory and philosophical thinking. His concepts have been criticized for being unsystematic and vague (DiMaggio 1979), and this is to some extent true. On the other hand, Bourdieu is right in his defence: the complaints about eclecticism are only too often a shelter against criticism, an alibi for 'in-culture', a pretext for ghettoism (Bourdieu 1980b:24).

There is another reason for 'eclecticism'. The study of cultural forms in modern capitalist societies is a new approach in the field of sociology. The 'normal' empiricist sociology of the Anglo-Saxon variety has not conceptualized cultural forms in other than the Parsonian metaphysics of 'normative integration', whereas the Marxian renaissance of the 1960s has either reduced them to 'capitalist forms of consciousness' (the post-Frankfurtian school) or seen them only in relation to *political* ideology and domination (the Althusserian reading of Marx).

There is a necessity, thus, to account for the fact that the mature capitalist societies are class societies, while recognizing that the 'logic' of capitalist social relations does not appear as a direct reflection in aesthetic styles and cultural forms of everyday life. The historical importance of this point is augmented by the pulverization of class-based subcultures, by the atomization of society into individuals and individual families instead of class communities and neighbourhoods, and by the emergence of the service economy as the demographically dominant segment of society.

To realize this task, Bourdieu (1979:109–144) uses a model of society which can be seen as a simple formal analogy of the Marxian concept of capital. Everyday life is a conglomeration of 'fields' such as leisure, family patterns, consumption,

work, artistic practices, etc. In each of these fields there are two major forms of assets: money and cultural competence, and Bourdieu conceptualizes these as economic and cultural 'capital' respectively, because both of these assets may accumulate – but not without competition. Those who adhere to a strict interpretation of Marx's *Capital* would probably call this a rather liberal use of the concept – some would even call it a naive economism applying a concept of capital (understood as a formal model of capitalist economy) by analogy to any area of social interaction.

Even if one takes this criticism seriously, Bourdieu's use of the analogy can be justified. It must be emphasized that for him it is *only* an analogy. He is far from any attempt to prove that the cultural forms of everyday life are 'deformed' as the result of the 'labelling' effects of capital (understood as the 'übergreifende Subjekt' of capitalist society). This intellectualist moralism, characteristic of the tradition of 'critical' Marxism in Germany (Krahl, Negt, Krowoza) and in Scandinavia (Schanz) is very alien to the critical sociology of Bourdieu.

Why should he then conceptualize as 'capital' the cultural supremacy of the dominating classes, which they have acquired in formal education? In my view, the power of the analogy (keeping in mind that it is *only* an analogy) derives from the state of the reality itself in modern capitalist societies. The cultural forms in which class differences appear in everyday life are no longer self-evident, as they were even up to the 1950s. The working class has become less and less distinguishable and is less and less distinguishable itself as a class. On the other hand, the power of the dominant classes is no longer only divided between their national fractions, but increasingly also between the national bourgeoisies and such supranational centres of power as the multinational corporations and international organizations. Facing the weakening of traditional correspondence between class position, political organization and cultural practices, it is in the area of 'private' life, style and taste, where the apparition of the class structure in capitalist societies must be found. That the economic model applies to the contestation for distinction in taste and style is an important consequence of these historical developments which Hirsch (1980) calls 'Durchkapitalisierung'. The social relationships of everyday life have been turned into markets of esteem. The various groups of wage labourers, uprooted from their class collectivities, are isolated competitors against each other. They are no longer only owners of their own commodity, their labour power, but also owners of themselves: a commodity has become a treasure and as known from Marx, treasure tends to be capital. As isolated individuals, also the wage labourers of modest means may capitalize their cultural competence on the market for social esteem, accumulate it by participating in the cultural activities defined as legitimate by the elites, and profit from it in the form of social ascent.

Habitus – the mystery of everyday aesthetics

The programme of sociology that Bourdieu has outlined for himself is a difficult one. To be able to see the meaning of the minuscule forms of habitual practices and to place them in a structural context requires a sensitive 'eye' and a profound imagination. It will not be possible for just anyone to do the same, following his example, although Bourdieu always writes extensively of his methodological views

and procedures. The basic notion in Bourdieu's methodological position is his conception of *the habitus*. By this he means that the various practices of living among a certain class or group are harmonized and homologized in accordance with its specific living conditions, but not mechanically determined to fulfil a social function, an individual 'need' or an 'algebraic pattern'. This harmonization and homologization is brought about by a common habitus, a generative principle, *modus operandi*, that is at the same time a system that generates perceptions and a system that generates practices. The harmonizing effect of habitus is based on the similarity of the living conditions of the members of the group. The homology principle means simply that the habitus integrates different aspects of the life-style: taste in dietary patterns, housing patterns, style of dressing, aesthetic codes, etc. into a consistent whole. Thus the same principles (or meaning structures) that appear in working class clothing should be found in its dietary patterns and artistic taste.

Habitus is not a one-to-one function of living conditions. Cultural forms have an inertia (Bourdieu 1979:195) that survives, often through several generations, the material basis that may change very rapidly (Bourdieu 1979:195). This point is made most strikingly in his studies on Algeria, in which Bourdieu shows how the precapitalist way of life determined by the agricultural cycle survives along with the linear conception of time imposed by the colonial transformation of the economy (Bourdieu & Sayad 1964; Bourdieu *et al.* 1964; Bourdieu 1978).

Thus, the habitus of a group or a class defines a symbolic order within which it conducts its practices – in everyday life as well as in the feast. It provides a common framework within which the members of the group understand their own and each other's actions and through which the researcher can make sense of them. But it is not a deterministic formula or a set of norms (cf. Parsons) to which individuals are expected to conform. Lower middle class people do not prefer Raffaello to Picasso because there is a norm saying they should. They simply like Raffaello and do not like Picasso. What this preference means and how it has been generated is a matter of the habitus – it is for the researcher to find out. But this preference is an active choice. There is a cultural code that defines a symbolic value to cultural practices – going to certain kinds of art museums for example – and the habitus of each group or class is formed in the practical choice of utilizing these values, defining oneself in terms of them and expressing one's self-definition by attachment to certain specific artistic genres (or life-styles).

The concept or habitus has been said to be a vague one (DiMaggio 1979:1467). Since the habitus is defined as a generating principle of style that endures the changes in objective living conditions, while it is also conditioned by them, we can never be sure to which end the explanation of cultural phenomena should appeal: to the function with respect to living conditions or to the durability of cultural codes.

To understand this ambiguity of Bourdieu's methodology, it is necessary to see it in the context of anthropological traditions and in the French intellectual scene in general.

The methodological point of view

Above I indicated two clues to this methodology. The first was the interpretation

of the Algerian kinship system as a form of domination and as a field of contestation for position, rather than as a function of total society or a definite set of rules or behavioural norms. The second was that the educational system and the meaning system produced and reproduced by it are not just a structure, but fields of action. They are used by individuals to accumulate their economic and cultural capital, and they do this as acting subjects with meaningful intentions (although they do not always know what they are in fact doing).

These two 'clues' are important because they exemplify Bourdieu's attitude to two methodological oppositions that have had an important place in French anthropological methodology. The first opposition is that between functionalism and semiological anthropology (which interprets anthropological data in terms of meaning systems) and the second opposition is between structuralism and existentialism, the French version of phenomenology.

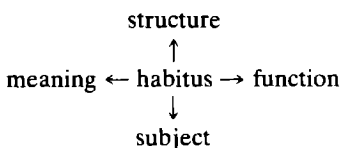
It has been said that in anthropology two traditions have existed in parallel. When studying institutional realities, some anthropologists ask what they mean while others ask what functions they serve (Augé 1978:139). That interpretations based on these two starting points are in fact very different is easy to see in the light of the example of kinship systems. From the semiotic (or structuralist) point of view such institutions provide meaning systems by which the members of the group can understand their position not only in society but in the world as a whole, and which they can use as a general means of orientation towards in the environment. The explanation for such meaning systems need not necessarily lie in their functions with respect to the material existence or reproduction of the group. They may be symbolic reflexions of something that has nothing directly to do with who may marry whom and who should live with whom.

The notion of habitus, for Bourdieu, is a way of rejecting functionalism. His basic argument against it is that it takes an objectivist point of view in seeing cultural forms as *faits accomplis* or *post festum*. For Bourdieu there is no functional calculus between the exigencies of survival or integration and the structured practices of its members. They are constantly producing new meanings, and far from being determined by the existing institutions their actions are a way of using them in the struggle for dominance, power and prestige (Bourdieu 1972:Chapitre 1; Bourdieu 1980a:51-70). It is the anti-functionalism of the concept of habitus that makes it relevant to the Marxist conceptions of a way of life. Pinçon (1978) argues, from a definitely Marxist point of view, that the concept of need based on reproduction of the labour force, must be complemented by the conception of habitus as 'interiorization of the exterieur'.

The same argument also works in the other dimension, that between structuralism and existentialist subjectivism. While Durkheimian sociological functionalism defines cultural institutions in terms of their contribution to *social* or *moral* integration, Bourdieu accuses Lévi-Straussian philosophical anthropology for seeing them as serving the functions of *logical* integration (Bourdieu 1980a:160-162). Again, the habitus is constantly being formed in the daily practices of individual subjects (which for Bourdieu are often families) and while it is a structured system of meanings it does not follow any mechanistic formal or 'algebraic' logic. People do not simply reproduce their meaning systems, they also produce and use them. One must see classes and their members not just as actors in a prefabricated play

but also as creative subjects. As such their actions and thoughts should not be interpreted in terms of a 'logic' but rather in terms of a 'sense' (hence the title of *Le sens pratique*). This sense is generated by the objective living conditions, but since it is itself able to generate new 'sense' it is by no means reducible to a function of them. On the other hand, Bourdieu warns against going too far with Lévi-Strauss in rejecting the notion of mythology and magic as *Urduhmheit*, primitive stupidity in the spiritual reflection of nature and man's relation to it. One should not forget that the symbolic systems are fundamentally mundane, not the result of abstract logical requirements (Bourdieu 1980a:160).

The mainstream of Bourdieu's argumentation is directed against academic anthropology and structuralist anthropology in particular. Thus he is aiming more fire against the semiotic and structuralist ends of the two dimensions outlined above than their respective polar opposites: functionalism and subjectivism. There is no doubt that this is due to the dominant position of the 'linguistic model' (Pettit 1975:37-39) and structuralist objectivism in France. However, Bourdieu can by no means be seen as a deserter of the structuralist camp or as an opponent of the linguistic model, despite the arrogance of his reservations to them – hence the vagueness of the concept of habitus. In a way it could be seen as a working compromise between the oppositions of the two dimensions:



It reminds us that while it is necessary to see human practices as structured by meaning systems and as their expressions, they also serve various functions determined by objective conditions of existence; and while they are parts of a structure they are carried out, produced, reproduced and used by living individuals. (A very similar diagram has been proposed by Marc Augé to conceptualize the major theoretical dimensions in contemporary anthropological discourse. In place of the opposition *structure-subject* he puts the opposition *culture-evolution* [Augé 1979:37].)

To those attracted by model building and grand theoretical systems such compromising vagueness may seem too generous in granting artistic freedoms to the scientist making his interpretations of cultural phenomena. While it is true that Bourdieu's sociology can never develop into a routine and that it does not lend itself to systematic generation of precise hypotheses which could be rigorously tested by mathematical and statistical methods, it is doubtful whether the appearance of methodological rigour is ever anything more than just an appearance. Sociology is a creative science, one of the forms in which society thinks of itself, and the only way of avoiding error is to be aware of the alternatives offering themselves as guiding principles in interpreting concrete phenomena. Although Bourdieu for the most part formulates his methodological positions in a negative way, aware he is.

Modern France: a culture contesting for distinction

By a sociologist, the advantages of the awareness and flexibility of Bourdieu's methodological position can best be appreciated in his interpretations of the cultural forms in modern France. In this respect it is *La distinction* that must be considered his chef-d'oeuvre. (An anthropologist or a philosopher might profit more from *Le sens pratique*.)

La distinction is a summary and interpretation of a large number of empirical studies of the life-styles and cultural institutions of France, of which several have been published earlier in monograph form (*Les héritiers*, *L'amour d'art*, *Un art moyen*), but some of which are published here for the first time.

The book is a very elaborate and comprehensive treatment of the different ways of life and class-based habituses in modern French culture. It is not possible to render the sense of the richness of the text in a few sentences, but one or two important observations can be made of the way Bourdieu structures the cultural forms of his society.

In France, as in all other highly industrialized capitalist countries, the occupational structure has greatly changed in the course of the post-war period, especially in the 1960s. Service occupations have mushroomed, and the new middle class has grown, and while education has become more important and more accessible, its value has been depreciated both in the labour market and in the market of social esteem. It is in this context of 'reclassification' (Bourdieu 1979:145-176) of French society that Bourdieu places his analysis of cultural forms. The most interesting contrast that he finds in the cultural between different classes is that between the urban working classes and the white collar and upper classes. The styles of working class are predominantly 'functional'. It eats food that has the function of nourishment: fat, carbohydrates, wine, strong meat, patés, etc. It does not pay attention to the *form* of food, it does not change plates between different courses of the meal, etc. In clothing, the same functionality appears: the distinction between outer garments and underwear is not very clear, clothes are not worn to be seen but to clothe the body. In a similar way, the working class culture embodies a functional aesthetic taste. In his study of photography (Bourdieu *et al.* 1965) he noticed that the value of photographs was closely associated with their use as symbols of the family. Also aesthetic judgments of photographs shown to working class respondents always referred to the *use* that could be made of them and the context in which they could be shown. An 'artistic' photograph of a nude woman that in no way is pointedly 'sexy' was said to be 'good for the Pigalle'. A photograph of a dead soldier was commented on in terms of its influence on spectators as regards their acceptance of war. In a similar vein, Bourdieu and his team have found the same functional puritanism at the root of the demand for representativeness as regards art (Bourdieu & Darbel 1966). Non-figurative or abstract art has no meaning for the less educated classes, because they can see no *use* for it.

The polar opposite to the working class are the intellectuals: university professors, artists, and those in highly educated liberal professions. They possess a cultural capital which gives them a 'key' to the language(s) of art. For them the aesthetic experience has meaning and significance as such, it is its own function. They can place the works of art, of whatever sort, in a context of pre-learned classifications,

which renders them an autonomous readability independent of any practical use to which they might be put. Similarly, in food and clothing practices the intellectuals appreciate a great deal of distinction: between clothes worn inside and outside, the rituals associated with different types of food, etc. The making of such distinctions does not lead to extravagance. On the contrary, Bourdieu describes the intellectuals' life-style as aesthetic ascetism.

But it is the life-style of the nouvelle petite bourgeoisie that incites the best and most sensitive analyses. This group, or rather these groups, are also attached to fine distinctions between the meanings of different forms of practices, not for the sake or the pure aesthetic pleasure itself but for the sake of distinguishing themselves: 'To advance its interests and its plans of ascension (in the social hierarchy – PS), it is inclined to a Berkeleyian vision of the social world, thus reduced to a theatre in which to be is never anything but to be seen – or rather to a (mental) representation of a (theatrical) representation' (Bourdieu 1979:283). The new middle classes are not attached to traditional food, traditional forms of clothing, decorating the house or spending the leisure, because they have a future. In middle class professions it is always possible to support the 'trajectory' of upward mobility: hence the incessant contestation for cultural and personal distinction, passion for life. It is a passion, however, that is forced to be an empty one. Despite the material extravagance and the intensity of experiences, the life of the new bourgeoisie is bound to remain without content, because all that is originally its content is turned into a means of concurrence, contestation for distinction, an instrument of social ascendancy. Hence the concern for one's own body, the most convincing evidence of life as *my* life in *my* personality for *my* individual pleasure.

A society made visible

The pictures that Bourdieu draws of the different fractions of classes – those rising and those on the decline – are indeed vivid, full of flavour and telling. His ability to get across the feeling of what he means is indeed rare among sociologists. He does not avoid the use of photographs, advertisements and excerpts from popular literature to illustrate his argument.

Many of the themes on middle-class culture are not new as such, and, as has often been pointed out (e.g. Swartz 1977), the arguments might profit from being presented more explicitly in the context of parallel theories. In some respects his treatment of the new middle class is very close to Riseman's *Lonely Crowd* (1950); his discussion of the formalism of middle-class consumption patterns is near Haug's analysis of Warenästhetik (1971), whereas his point about the 'functionality' of working class aesthetics and consumption styles is close to what Lindner (1977) calls the use-value orientation of the working class. It is also hard not to see the influence of Barthes (1957) or Baudrillard (1968) in the analysis of the symbolism of consumption styles.

In my view the novelty deserving the greatest merit in Bourdieu's analysis of modern France is its comprehensiveness. This comes out most clearly in *La Distinction*. He sees the same pattern of contestation for distinction operating everywhere, although manifesting itself in very different forms of comportment, opinions and survey responses. Thus 'class analyses' are not to be seen only as

separate descriptions of different ways of life in contemporary France. They amount to a profound insight into the structure of modern French society, its dynamics of change, dominated by bourgeois values vested in a vast variety of symbolisms and encoded in a long tradition of legitimized elite culture. Characteristic of this insight is its presentation of French society as structured by one dominating feature: one's incessant effort to define position, to defend it against and to distinguish it from those below. It is this pervasive dimension of struggle that in the last instance is the key to the meanings of the different cultural forms in which the various life-styles manifest themselves. In methodological terms, the analysis brings to light the structure of French society. After reading *La distinction* it is possible to understand the hidden meanings behind the visible cultural practices. The hidden meaning structure is in fact nothing more than a reflexion of two characteristic features of the material, political and cultural structure of French society: the dominance of the bourgeoisie and the great and relatively autonomous role of intellectuals.

Now it is possible to see that when Bourdieu defines culture as that which has the highest legitimate aesthetic and social value, he does so with reason. In French society, in his view, it is the pursuit for expressions of cultural competence that motivates the style and aesthetic practices of all classes. When the pretension of competence does not coincide with actual competence, style outgrows the aesthetic, form subjugates the content. But the legitimacy of the elite culture is never questioned as such. The difference in the definitions of culture between Bourdieu and his British counterparts is not a difference of theoretical orientation but a difference in the societies themselves (see also Passeron 1970).

Despite his extensive work in Algeria and in France, Bourdieu seldom makes any direct cultural comparisons between these two societies. He does not extensively refer to foreign literature and does not try to locate France in its specific place among the capitalist countries. It is his treatment of working class culture that would most profit from such comparisons. Bourdieu goes to the extreme in denying even the possibility of an autonomous working class culture (Bourdieu 1979:433-461 and 1980b:15). For the British, and certainly for the Scandinavians, this position must sound odd, facing the importance of the 'pub-culture' in Britain and the extensive working class cultures and their role in the political mobilization of the working class in Scandinavia. Concerning Bourdieu's works on education, Swartz (1977) doubts whether the competitive class model is in fact valid only in the case of the middle strata that have something to 'invest' in the market of economic and cultural capital. One wonders to what extent, after all, the two large working class parties in France could maintain their strength if the cultural practices of the working class were so totally obedient to the codes dictated by the elites, so totally void of autonomous creative power as Bourdieu describes them. What is the 'functionalism' of working class style and aesthetic taste if it is not a conscious and subconscious rejection of the coquetry of the bourgeoisie?

Apart from that, Bourdieu's insight on French society seems credible and illuminating. In pointing out how thoroughly bourgeois French culture actually is, the method of Bourdieu makes its structure visible in the variety of cultural forms in which people express their aspirations, definitions of the world, common experiences and common meanings. This could not be done without the emphasis of

meaning, which Bourdieu has inherited from the structuralist anthropology, but neither could it be done without emphasis on subjective action and objective functionality, for the lack of which he criticizes it.

So the greatest merit of Bourdieu's methodological 'eclecticism' or 'compromise' is that it brings to light those social structures that social theorists are usually only able to describe in the abstract or that they desperately try to find in statistics. Society manifests itself in the cultural forms in which and through which people express it: in style, taste and aesthetic appreciation. But to *see* it requires that these expressions are not reduced to their abstract functions or to logical formulas or – even worse – seen only as subjective whims. Thus, the novelty and originality of Bourdieu's thinking and of his concrete analyses are indisputably an important contribution, not only in the area of life-style studies, but in the macroanalysis of modern capitalist societies at large.

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