

Does Cultural Capital Still Classify Us?

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A new essay collection considers the relevance and stakes of a contemporary re-reading of Pierre Bourdieu's book *Distinction*, which was first published in 1979. The result is a critical discussion that is particularly vibrant, as much in terms of the positions the authors take vis-à-vis Bourdieu, as in terms of the themes and origins of the scholars who appropriate his arguments.

Reviewed: Philippe Coulangeon and Julien Duval, eds., *Trente ans après La Distinction de Pierre Bourdieu* [Thirty Years after Bourdieu's *Distinction*], La Découverte, 2013. 272 p., 34 €.

Bourdieu's *Distinction*, which was first published in 1979, is one of the most cited and read works of sociology written in French—which does not, however, mean that it is always read correctly. Since its appearance, the book, which was as original in its substance as in its methodology, has met with a mixed reception, eliciting dithyrambic praise as well as acerbic attacks from scholars and journalists. It belongs to a series of studies conducted by the author and several of his collaborators, notably Jean-Claude Passeron, on the illusions of educational meritocracy and their role in legitimating inequalities in the distribution of cultural capital, as well as on museum attendance and the practice of photography.¹ Drawing on the abundant data they collected in studies conducted between 1960 and 1970, Bourdieu challenged the maxim that taste is inherently natural. Quite to the contrary: employing the new (at the time) methodology known as multiple correspondence analysis, which consists first in placing various variables and individuals into a two or three dimensional coordinates based on their relative proximity, then in interpreting the meaning of the axes that structure this space, Bourdieu and his team demonstrated not only that taste and cultural practices are not randomly distributed through social space, but that they obey a hierarchy that resurfaces in multiple realms.

In other words, the space of social positions defined according to the overall volume of economic and cultural capital which social agents possess, the relative distribution of each of form of capital, and the space of cultural preferences, exhibit strong structural homologies. The latter express and even realize the relative social position of their members through more or less covert struggles of classification that occur on a daily basis. Bourdieu's first contribution is to have revealed the cultural dimension of social stratification, against a narrowly materialist vision which granted no autonomy to cultural factors, while also stressing the eminently relational character of these processes, a fact that some substantivist readers fail to grasp when they

¹ See, respectively, Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron, *Les héritiers*, Paris, Minuit, 1964 and *La Reproduction*, Paris, Minuit, 1970; Pierre Bourdieu and Alain Dardel, *L'amour de l'art*, Paris, Minuit, 1966 and Pierre Bourdieu, ed., Robert Castel, ed., Luc Boltanski, and Jean-Claude Chamboredon, *Un art moyen*, Paris, Minuit, 1965.

conclude, based on Bourdieu's data, that certain tastes and practices inherently characterize particular social groups to the exclusion of others. Put differently, practices are not inherently classificatory, like the game of *pétanque* for the French working class; they are so only in relation to other practices and social classes, whose tastes and (in particular) distastes represent their relationship to others people. While this revamped approach to social stratification developed by Bourdieu has now become essential to any sociologist's training, some take pleasure in pointing out its limitations, whether temporal (the fact that this data was collected during the 1960s and 1970s), spatial (their focus on French society), or theoretical (the fact that its theoretical framework was largely inspired by earlier authors, including Norbert Elias, Edmond Goblot, and Thorstein Veblen, and that it is said to have lost its validity as society has supposedly become more eclectic and less differentiated). Hence the question that is asked of any work that has acquired the status of a classic: more than three decades after its publication, why should we still read *Distinction*?

This question inspired a major conference that was held in Paris in November 2010, upon which this collection is based. In their introduction, after revisiting the debates that followed *Distinction's* publication, the two organizers, Philippe Coulangeon and Julien Duval, admit their surprise at the massive response to their call for papers, which alone testifies to continued interest in the topic. More than 130 papers were ultimately presented, half of which by non-French scholars. Of these, only 25 were published, the goal of the selection being to present the major themes that the conference brought to light.

Distinction: Intellectual Context, Reception, and Elaboration

The first part of the volume is devoted to *Distinction's* context. Monique Saint-Martin, one of Bourdieu's most loyal collaborators, recounts the work's genesis, focusing on its sources and method—i.e., its famous multiple correspondences analysis—but also the misunderstandings that arose from the difficulty of considering multiple dimensions simultaneously. Next, Gisèle Sapiro considers the book's international reception, pointing out that it also crossed disciplinary boundaries, while Michèle Lamont considers the case of the United States, where *Distinction* helped to build bridges between French and American sociologists, though its reception by the latter was more pluralistic. Jean-Louis Fabiani's and Louis Pinto's essays are, for their part, more theoretical: they seek to clear up a number of misunderstandings about Bourdieu's argument and to suggest rules for the “correct usage” of *Distinction*, to quote the title of Pinto's somewhat normative essay.

In a second set of texts, the authors present their own research in the sociology of culture in order to acknowledge their conceptual debts to Bourdieu and the continued validity of his findings. Whether it be the audience of the Ensemble Intercontemporain—the only regular French orchestra devoted to contemporary music—or young people in working-class milieus in London or Seine-Saint-Denis, avid readers of crime novels or the food tastes of Boston gentrifiers (i.e., members of the upper classes who move to traditionally working-class neighborhoods²), the contributors show the extent to which the hierarchy of cultural contents does indeed remain a fruitful thesis in these areas of research. In this way, they help to significantly qualify the pervasive view that cultural legitimacy has been replaced by eclecticism, with an “omnivorous”

² See Sylvie Tissot, *De bons voisins*, Paris, Liber-Raisons d'agir, 2011.

dominant class on one side and a “univorous” dominated class on the other. This argument was first proposed by Richard Peterson³ and has been promoted in France by Olivier Donnat, the principal investigator on the studies on French cultural practices that are periodically commissioned by the French Culture Ministry. Olivier Roueff and Benard Lahire propose a number of critical and theoretical elaborations of Bourdieu’s work by respectively examining the concept of structural homology, which Bourdieu coined without developing, from the standpoint of the role of cultural middlemen and by discussing the extent to which a single individual can transfer between realms a disposition to appreciate works and practices possessing the same degree of legitimacy. In his own work, Lahire has shown that the norm which prevails in cultural practices is not coherence but, rather, dissonance, which does not rule out the need to distinguish oneself from oneself.⁴

International and Theoretical Perspectives

The third part of the book considers international perspectives, not so much as areas of research (at least some of the previously discussed essays dealt with non-French topics) as the authors themselves. Thus a group of French and British scholars presents the results of a major study of British cultural practices conducted in the 2000s, using the method of multiple correspondence analysis, which they describe in a pedagogical spirit. According to these scholars, the key factor in differentiating tastes and cultural practices is class membership, in addition to its homologies in other realms, though the coordinates generated by the statistical analysis were not quite identical to those that Bourdieu and his team identified in their own study. According to this data, the true fault line is not between legitimate cultural and an illegitimate culture, but between those who participate in cultural activities and those who don’t, which would seem to give credence to the view that distinction has now become eclectic. They also observe, again in contrast to *Distinction*, that some tastes and practices are shared by most people and, consequently, are not classificatory, and that a sharp boundary exists between college educated middle classes and unqualified working classes. The other studies in this section deal with the way in which social stratification, considered symbolically, is inscribed in urban space (based on the example of Porto); on the prevalence among Sao Paolo’s wealthiest inhabitants of a “taste for tradition,” which rejects avant-garde culture—a finding that, according to the author, further contradicts the thesis of the rise of an “omnivorous” elite; and, in a similar vein, a comparison between Great Britain and Denmark, which, while also referring to other studies (notably of Serbia), shows that even if it has declined, a legitimate scholarly culture still exists in these societies, through which their dominant classes continue to distinguish themselves. This culture has, however, evolved, notably through the development of new technology and the rise of a kind of cosmopolitanism, which, the authors argue, distinguishes itself from popular culture less through any specific content than through the ways in which it is appropriated. In other words, that fact that members of the dominant class share certain cultural objects with the dominated class does not mean that they consume them in the same way.

Part four consists of essays discussing the theory of social stratification and class relations that are implicit in *Distinction*—which, without ever being its explicit theme, are nonetheless the

³ Notably in his article “Understanding Audience Segmentation: From Elite and Mass to Omnivore and Univore,” *Poetics*, vol. 21, n°4, 1992, p. 243-258.

⁴ See *La Culture des individus*, Paris, La Découverte, 2004.

book's heart, as Philippe Coulangeon and Julien Duval observe (p. 384). Thus Gérard Mauger addresses Pierre Bourdieu's relationship with the working class, notably the famous charge leveled by two of his former collaborators, Claude Grignon and Jean-Claude Passeron, that Bourdieu was excessively pessimistic, which Mauger sees as a debate over Bourdieu's legacy.⁵ Yet he concedes that Grignon and Passeron were right to recognize that Bourdieu paid insufficient attention to diversity within the working class compared to his careful analysis of the differences found within the dominating classes. Marie-Hélène Lechien and Lise Bernard, for their part, reconsider in their respective essays the relevance of the contested concept of "new petite bourgeoisie," which Bourdieu coined, whereas Agnès Van Zanten examines the ways in which the upper ranks of the middle classes use their capital in the educational strategies they pursue on their children's behalf.

Shedding Light on Political Behavior

The book's fifth and final section is devoted to *Distinction's* contribution to political sociology, one of the work's crucial but often overlooked dimensions. Daniel Gaxie, the author of essential studies on the "hidden poll tax" which exists in modern democracies due to the unequal distribution of political competencies and particularly of the sense of competence,⁶ reconsiders Bourdieu's analysis of the problem of how political opinions are formed and the ways in which they are activated, while Daniel Laurison, using a multiple correspondence analysis of data collected in the United States in 2006, shows how relevant this cultural approach to electoral behavior is to understanding contemporary American society, where voter abstention rates exceed Europe's. Paradoxically, Bruno Cautrès, Flora Chanvil, and Nonna Mayer, drawing on studies of French elections, qualify Bourdieu's thesis that there exists a structural homology between one's social position, which can be measured in terms of respective levels of economic and cultural capital, and expressed political tendencies. They thus call attention to a number of shifts that have occurred in the opinions of various socio-professional groups over the past thirty years, emphasizing in particular the fact that this identity is only one of any number of factors influencing political preferences, while acknowledging that relative distribution of cultural and economic capital does indeed have a divisive effect on social agents' electoral preferences.

Finally, the last part of the book consists of the "new territories" that the theory of distinction might reasonably explore. Jean-Baptiste Comby and Mathieu Grossetête's article is, from this standpoint, particularly illuminating. Drawing on their respective research areas of public policy as it relates to energy consumption and road traffic safety, they show how the rise, in these domains as in others, of norms of individual safety reveals in fact shifts in the struggle for distinction between social classes. Struggles over classification, which are occluded by a moralizing discourse that are blind to the dispositions and opportunities differentiating agents in terms of social class. Frédéric Roux, for his part, seeks to challenge the homogeneity of a practice—in this case, fishing—that is seen from the outside, by showing the extent to which it can be the object of highly differentiated and hierarchized appropriations depending on its practitioners' cultural resources. Finally, Fabrice Ripoll, echoing the previously mentioned article on the town of Porto, suggests that we must be more attentive than was Bourdieu either in *Distinction* or in his later writings to what he calls capital's spatial dimension—in other words,

⁵ See *Le Savant et le Populaire*, Paris, Seuil, 1989.

⁶ See, in particular, *Le Cens caché*, Paris, Seuil, 1978.

the projection of class relations into physical space—including in dynamic ways, through the study of closely intertwined social and spatial mobilities⁷—by considering “physical space” as “reified social space.”

Thus each in its own way, these essays confirm the status that *Distinction* has acquired as a standard reference for analyzing contemporary social relations, in France and beyond. “Reference,” however, is not the same as “reverence”: while some defend the theory Bourdieu developed, criticism and debate are not lacking. Herein lies the interest of this edited volume. In any event, theoretically as well as empirically, the conceptual tools that Bourdieu created in this work and which he subsequently developed, as well as the innovative and rigorous methodology which underwrites it, shapes the way in which we approach such questions as cultural taste and practices, social stratification, and political behavior. In practice, these questions are hard to separate—and this is far from being the least important lesson bequeathed by the author of *Distinction*.

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⁷ For an illustration of this joint analysis, see, for example, the illuminating monograph on a residential neighborhood in Gonesse, on the outskirts of Paris, by Marie Cartier, Isabelle Coutant, Olivier Masclet, and Yasmine Siblot (*La France des petits-moyens*, Paris, La Découverte, 2008).