



DISTINCTION: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste

by Pierre Bourdieu
(translated by Richard Nice)

(Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 1984)

Pierre Bourdieu holds the Chair in Sociology at the prestigious Collège de France, a position that places him in the company of a number of other luminaries of French intellectual life. Not restricted to one type of sociology, or even to sociology *per se*, his interests are remarkably varied. He is probably best known outside of France as the sociologist of education who coined the phrase 'cultural capital', though he is read by anthropologists, social theorists and philosophers as well. The publication of *Distinction*, the most recent of his books to be translated into English, promises to extend that audience to include those engaged in an exploration of the political meaning of culture.

Readers wishing to get the most from *Distinction* will have to come to terms with a style that is irritating at times and a sociological perspective that challenges sociologists and non-sociologists alike. Because Bourdieu's arguments are shaped by a seemingly endless succession of positions defended and attacked, they can be hard to follow. There is, however, a principle behind this polemic. Running through Bourdieu's work is a sustained critique of various oppositions: 'objectivism and subjectivism', 'structuralism and phenomenology', 'theoreticism and empiricism' and so on. If Bourdieu has one overriding conceptual aim, it is moving debate in the social sciences and humanities through and beyond these kinds of oppositions.

Distinction begins by taking issue with a philosophical approach to the 'judgement of taste'. Like Durkheim, who challenged Kant's universal claims about the categories of human thought, Bourdieu challenges Kant's characterization of aesthetic judgement as a mysterious act removed from everyday considerations of usefulness, ethicality and intelligibility. According to Bourdieu, aesthetic judgement, like other social practices, cannot be understood apart from the social conditions that shape both the product being judged and the individual engaged in the activity of judgement.

To move beyond the philosophical position it is necessary to widen the frame of reference to include all cultural products, not just 'obviously' aesthetic products that belong to the domain of high culture or art. Having done this, Bourdieu can begin to draw on an anthropological tradition, to which he himself is a contributor, which construes culture as a 'way of life'. The idea of a 'lifestyle' is also used to capture this more inclusive sense of culture.

But Bourdieu's ambition is not merely to provide an account of the diversity of lifestyles in modern French society, thereby opening up the debate on aesthetic judgement. He is concerned rather

with providing a rigorous account of the system of lifestyles. This concern, which owes something to the insights of French structuralism, starts from the premise that the meaning of a cultural product, or a lifestyle, does not reside in that product, but in the relation between that product and every other product in the system. Hence the need to construct a grammar or map of the cultural system in order to understand the meaning of any particular product or lifestyle within that system.

If Bourdieu had stopped there, he would have stopped at that type of structural analysis that sets out to demonstrate that all culture is communication by identifying the patterns that underlie an aggregate of cultural products. But Bourdieu's approach to culture represents an advance over this type of analysis in at least two ways: the first concerns the link between culture, power and class; the second concerns the nature of cultural activity and the subject who is engaged in that activity.

In order to explore the relations between culture, power and class, Bourdieu makes use of the resources of classical sociology, including Marx (though his debt to the latter is hard to pinpoint). Axiomatic is the proposition that cultural products are arranged hierarchically and that this hierarchical arrangement is a source of power. Also important is the claim that the means of appropriating the most esteemed cultural products, and hence of maintaining certain relations of domination, are monopolized by privileged groups. Some groups are correspondingly excluded from the control of property, whether this is symbolic property ('cultural capital') or more straightforwardly economic property (other forms of capital). It is with this in mind that the struggles of the social world, including the struggles to define the social world, must be interpreted.

If it was only this political dimension of culture that was charted by Bourdieu, his work, as suggested, would represent a considerable advance over some forms of structuralism. But what is perhaps most unique in Bourdieu's work is his attempt to connect a political sociology of culture with a theory of the subject that is rich in the sensitivity to human experience that characterized the phenomenological tradition. Thus Bourdieu does more than map out the hierarchy of cultural products. He also explores the individual's (or group's) relation to the dominant culture.

It is in this context that Bourdieu's concept of the habitus, defined as a 'system of dispositions', has a role to play. By means of the habitus concept, which is explained more fully in his earlier works, Bourdieu attempts to connect the idea of culture to the embodied human subject. Bourdieu suggests that this relation has been severed by intellectuals whose idea

of culture is coloured by their intellectual relation to culture, by the fact that for them culture is primarily something to think about. Far from being an object of intellectual reflection, culture, for Bourdieu, is bound up with the very practical urgencies of everyday life. And against intellectualist tendencies Bourdieu stresses that culture is a bodily phenomenon. Even speech may be viewed as a technique of the body, a way of holding the mouth and a sense of knowing when and how to speak, the result both of past 'conditionings' and of unspoken, but deeply felt, censorships experienced by the individual in a given situation.

These theoretical insights, developed and employed in *Distinction*, merit close attention. What of the more substantive concerns? Bourdieu's model of French society includes three main classes, three objective classes as he might say: bourgeoisie, petite bourgeoisie and the working class. Associated with each objective class (and necessary to its definition) is a characteristic lifestyle or relation to the

grande bourgeoisie not only possesses discriminating tastes with respect to the most rare and sacred of aesthetic products; it also has the option of owning these products. When executed properly, the act of appreciating and owning is the consummate act of distinction as it directly enhances the person of the owner while symbolizing the time and money spent collecting beautiful and 'useless' objects.

Different from the grande bourgeoisie, but sharing its sense of distinction, are the more established intellectuals. Yet while the grande bourgeoisie seeks out an art that will reinforce its world views, intellectuals are more willing to take a chance with the avant-garde and generally with art forms that challenge bourgeois existence (though artists themselves are apt to view intellectual taste, with its 'sterile didacticism', as a variant of bourgeois taste). The bourgeoisie as a whole displays a certain social ease, knowing what to say and how to say it, regardless of the formality of the occa-



dominant culture. It is worth noting that in his discussion of objective class and lifestyle Bourdieu is close to Max Weber and he goes as far as to suggest that *Distinction* is 'based on an endeavour to rethink Max Weber's opposition between class and *Stand* (status).'

In three successive chapters Bourdieu analyses the lifestyles of each of the major classes, devoting some attention to the class fractions within them. At one extreme is the 'sense of distinction' that characterizes the bourgeoisie. The

The new bourgeoisie, especially, is flexible, and is able to assume several different looks or styles, from the conservative to the sporty, and even, in some contexts, to the rough and macho style of the manual worker. In this way the style of the 'modern manager' or new bourgeois may be distinguished from that of the 'old-style authoritarian industrialist', 'pot-bellied', 'pompous', and showing 'more restraint in language and morals'.

At the middle of the spectrum is the petite bourgeoisie. While some mem-

bers of this class may be content merely to recognize the codes of the dominant culture (and Bourdieu suggests such recognition occurs despite the conscious intentions of individuals), others attempt to acquire the distinguished relation to culture. Yet if the style of the bourgeoisie in relation to high culture is one of relaxed familiarity, that of the petite bourgeoisie is one of tension or pretension. The constant self-monitoring of the petite bourgeoisie originates in the context in which they acquire culture. Unlike the bourgeoisie which is likely to have acquired a sense of culture as 'second nature' through early experiences in the family, the petite bourgeoisie picks up a sense of culture through formal education, or worse, through its efforts to teach itself.

Bourdieu maintains that the marks of this mode of acquiring culture are unmistakable: '(The petite bourgeoisie) takes culture...too seriously to escape permanent fear of ignorance of blunders, or to side-step tests by responding with the indifference of those who are not competing or the serene detachment of those who feel entitled to confess or even flaunt their lacunae.' But the new petite bourgeoisie is not entirely excluded from the game. This class fraction, 'having abandoned the somewhat morose asceticism of the rising petite bourgeoisie', forms a 'natural ally' for the new bourgeoisie mentioned above. Both are engaged in establishing and responding to the need for new lifestyles. Bourdieu's brief but highly suggestive description of these new lifestyles recalls arguments made by Foucault and others about sexuality and therapy: 'The fear of not getting enough pleasure, the logical outcome of the effort to overcome the fear of pleasure, is combined with the search for self-expression and "bodily expression" and for communicating with others ("relating"—*échange*), even immersion in others (considered not as a group but as subjectivities in search of their identity); and the old personal ethic is thus rejected for a cult of personal health and psychological therapy.'

At the bottom of the cultural hierarchy in Bourdieu's framework are the working classes for whom the very choice of a lifestyle is heavily influenced by restrictions imposed by necessity. Bourdieu suggests that the working class aesthetic is the very antithesis of aesthetics, at least in the Kantian sense. Thus the members of the working class apply the standards of everyday life to aesthetic objects, disdaining "'frills" and "fancy nonsense"' in a range of cultural products including household decor. Working class women reject the 'typically bourgeois idea of making each object in the home the occasion for aesthetic choice, of extending the intention of harmony or beauty even into the bathroom or kitchen...' And they also reject the efforts devoted by bourgeois women to personal appearance. Working class men, Bourdieu goes on, are even less likely to waste time in the 'pretension' of personal style. Such pretensions are viewed as both bourgeois and feminine. In this regard, Bourdieu suggests that the culture of virility is a kind of psychological refuge for the working class male.

Bourdieu, as might be imagined, is very critical of romantic views of working class culture or any other form of counter culture. In his view, the values and codes of the dominant culture are pervasive and produce effects on conduct despite the activities of those who would reject them. These effects are even found in the area of explicitly political discourse. Because of their relation to language, the working classes are apt to distrust the generalizations and verbal strategies of politicians and other special-

ists in the production of political discourse. While this perspective on working class culture may suggest a certain pessimistic undertone in Bourdieu's work, it does not by any means preclude an understanding of roots of progressive social change.

That *Distinction* constitutes a major contribution to our understanding of the significance of culture in French society, and with some modifications in other national contexts, is indisputable. But the precise nature of that contribution is hard to specify. The theoretical insights noted earlier are of a high order. The methodological and rhetorical achievements are unique and imaginative. Bourdieu has developed a compelling albeit difficult narrative using as an empirical foundation the results of interviews combined with the results of a questionnaire that surveyed tastes as well as demographic data. But how far does *Distinction* take us towards an understanding of the role of culture in social reproduction, the question Nicholas Garnham and Raymond Williams suggested was fundamental for Bourdieu?¹

To those who object that Bourdieu has neglected the historical and conflictual aspects of social reproduction, I would suggest that his approach conforms to a logically defensible division of intellectual labour. There is no reason why Bourdieu's concepts cannot be applied to advantage in ethnographic studies of culture as well as in analyses of determinant factors in class formation, cultural resistance and political struggle. Though space prohibits an adequate consideration of this problem here, I would argue that Bourdieu's theoretical perspective is suited to a discussion of both social stability and social change.²

The charge that Bourdieu's analysis of the universe of lifestyles has a problematic connection to a theory of the major institutional influences on culture is more valid. There exists a danger, to which *Distinction* is by no means immune, that a discussion of lifestyles may become too far removed from an appraisal of the role of the state and private corporations in cultural and social reproduction.³ The result is an ambiguity with respect to the relative importance of various forms of power and capital in society.

This latter reservation aside, I feel that *Distinction* and many of Bourdieu's other publications will prove to be invaluable resources for the study of culture in Canada and elsewhere. Bourdieu is well aware that those doing sociology are themselves part of the struggles of the social world insofar as they contribute to definitions of the nature of those struggles. Perhaps more than anything else, his work provides a refreshing example of what intellectuals can accomplish when they set out to explore the politics of culture fully aware that they are starting from the intellectual's relation to culture.

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Notes

1. Nicholas Garnham and Raymond Williams, 'Pierre Bourdieu and the sociology of culture: an introduction.' *Media, Culture & Society* 3 (1980), p.211.
2. For a detailed analysis of this issue see Bourdieu, 'On Reproduction, Habitus and Education'. *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 2 (1984), pp.117-127.
3. For a relevant analysis of changing influences on cultural production in the United States, see Paul DiMaggio and Michael Useem, 'The arts in class reproduction', in *Cultural and Economic Reproduction in Education: Essays on Class, Ideology and the State*, ed. Michael Apple (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul), pp. 247-274.



Of the many personal issues that the women's movement has thrown up for political debate in recent years, one powerful issue has been long evaded. As the two authors of *Face Value* ruefully remark, we have discussed almost all of the issues that have made us feel alone and insecure—all except personal beauty. Happily for us in *Face Value* they have taken the challenge of analyzing the power that beauty holds over us.

Beauty? A political issue? Certainly, argue the authors, for 'it figures in the exchange of power and influence.' Beauty is not, they explain, power in itself. It is a passive attribute existing only through the judgement of others. But for women, systematically excluded from power, beauty is hugely significant. It is the one value that enables us to attract those who do have power. The ideal traditional marriage is just that exchange of her beauty for his wealth, influence and power.

Face Value is a disconcerting reminder of how much women are still valued, and feel valued, primarily on the basis of our looks. Beauty is fundamental to our sense of selves as women whether we beautify ourselves or not. Many women are indeed 'controlled by the tyranny of looks, by the threat of having approval, and with it power, withheld.' The authors argue that 'discrimination based on beauty is more prevalent than discrimination based on race.' The book explores how and why beauty holds so much power.

The authors examine the myths and stereotypes of beautiful women, their visual representation in painting and sculpture, the language of beauty, men and beauty and the effect of white standards of beauty on other races. The book's eclectic focus shifts constantly, segregating rather than integrating these component issues. Unfortunately, through the cracks of their approaches the question of why beauty is conferred with such power finally slips away unanswered. In the meantime the authors give us fascinating and insightful descriptions of the power of beauty in our lives.

In 'Beauty in Our Times' the authors examine the role of the camera and the media on beauty. In the process they give us a great description of capital's commodification of beauty. Mass production and mass communication turned beauty from something rarely beheld to something constantly beheld. Beauty, once the privilege of the leisured class, became available to all. The ingredients of beauty could be bought everywhere inexpensively and the media's message that we must be beautiful reached into the lives of people of all classes.

Visual images of beauties—professional beauties—bombard us daily and we respond by buying, we buy constantly at magazine racks, cosmetic counters and movie houses. Stars such as Greta Garbo or Farrah Fawcett Major set standards of beauty that affected millions simultaneously. Literally thousands of women made themselves over in those particular styles. Already narrowly focused on one race, the range of prescribed beauty shrank to one style, one fashion at a time, elusively out of the reach of most women.

'The message we are given daily by the myriad images of beauty is that women must look a certain way to be loved and admired—to be worth anything.' Yes, but it's all too easy to confuse the message with the response. There's no denying that most women at some point in

FACE VALUE: The Politics of Beauty

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their lives measure themselves against the current norm of beauty and find themselves woefully lacking. But what we do about it will differ according to our age, our class background, our race and our personal circumstances. *Face Value* tends to assume both that white western standards of beauty are powerful universal standards and that all women respond docilely to the imperative to be beautiful.

Women of all races have fought back against normative messages of beauty. Blacks in western society have rebelled against the equation of white with beauty and against social ranking in the black community based on lightness of skin. White notions of beauty lie at the heart of racism and, as the authors state, 'Beauty is never more political than when it is used to prop up the power of one race while it renders others powerless, immured in self hatred.' But the black is beautiful rebellion has only minimally penetrated the visual media and its standards of beauty. Black models and actors by and large are still obliged to possess under their skins the Caucasian features of the white ideal of beauty.

Beauty's power is used to divide men from women, women from women, race from race. To be beautiful is compensation for lack of power, but a beautiful woman is not a powerful woman. It is beauty, not woman, who has the power, and in pursuit of power we seek beauty. 'Perhaps until recently women had so little else to make their lives comfortable, psychologically as well as physically, that they needed the promise of beauty, and the thrill of competition with