Book review: *Culture, Class, Distinction*
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Book review


*Culture, Class, Distinction* is one of the central outcomes from an Economic and Social Research Council funded project, *Cultural Capital and Social Exclusion: A Critical Investigation*, which commenced in 2003. The project aimed to revisit the methodological and theoretical relevance of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu’s conception of ‘cultural capital’ for understanding the relations between cultural taste and consumption and social class in contemporary Britain. The study examined aspects of consumption and participation in the cultural fields of music, reading, visual art, television, film and sport in order to find out: 1. whether it is possible to detect cultural capital and, if so, what form it takes; 2. whether there are homologous sets of distinctions between different cultural fields (if you like opera are you more likely to eat French food, for instance); and, 3. to what extent particular classes are advantaged by the organisation of cultural resources and how do similar processes operate on the relations between gender and ethnic groupings (2009, 12-14). The study identified cultural engagement, as manifested in 1. particular kinds and frequency of cultural participation, 2. particular tastes, and, 3. particular kinds of cultural knowledge (ibid, 38), through a questionnaire which was administered to 1791 of the UK population aged 18+ (a random sample of 1564 and an ethnic boost of 227 targeted at Britain’s 3 major ethnic groups: Indian, Pakistani and black Caribbean). A further 25 focus groups and semi-structured interviews in 30 households (44 persons) were conducted with survey respondents who agreed to a follow-up interview.1

The project aimed to replicate Bourdieu’s study, reported in *Distinction* (1984), while also extending and qualifying it to take account of its shortcomings and contemporary social and political historical contexts. In particular, Bennett, Savage, Silva, Warde, Gayo-Cal and Wright add contemporary theorizations of gender and ethnicity to Bourdieu’s conception of habitus as rooted in class disposition. Bennett *et al.* discuss cultural capital in relation to a conception of habitus which understands person formation as bound up with a range of complex interactions between class, gender, age and ethnicity. This analysis of gender, age and ethnicity and class, and the interactions between them also allows the decoupling of Bourdieu’s conception of cultural capital and class, with its limitation that cultural capital functions only or primarily in relation to class differentiation. Rather Bennett *et al*’s analysis attempts to shine light on the variety of ways in which cultural resources are deployed in a variety of social relations (ibid).

In common with other contemporary studies of cultural taste (for example, Chan and Goldthorpe, 2007 and Bunting, Chan, Goldthorpe, Keaney and Oskala, 2008) Bennett *et al* find a cultural omnivorousness (the appreciation of different cultural genres regardless of their ‘high’ or ‘low’ classification) among certain social groupings, which challenges the high and low culture distinction used by Bourdieu. In other words, ‘rather than a divide between high and

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popular culture, we find a primary cleavage between those who appear culturally active and engaged in a wide variety of activities, and those who seem relatively detached with a more limited range of cultural interests and activities’ (ibid, 43). These orientations overlap with class and educational distinctions. However, a crucial distinction between this study and others is Bennett et al’s questioning of the implications for the operation of cultural capital of the existence of cultural omnivorousness amongst the middle and upper classes. Rather they find that cultural omnivorousness is one orientation towards cultural resources: the others include the Kantian aesthetic (the ethos of disinterestedness and for Bourdieu the marker of high cultural capital), ‘snob’ culture (access and participation in exclusive cultural practices), and command of knowledges/ activities most highly valued by the education system (ibid, 30-31). Recognition of these different modalities allows Bennett et al. to distinguish them as different cultural capitals and different orientations which provide different kinds and degrees of advantage in different cultural, economic and social spheres (ibid). It is in this analytical move to attempt to isolate the existence of several forms of cultural capital through which they aim to understand ‘the complex connections within the cultural domain’, rather than ‘seeking to delineate the power of reified, “master” variables’ (such as ‘legitimate’ cultural forms) (ibid, 39), that this study provides a theoretically ground breaking and sophisticated analysis of the operation of cultural capital in the contemporary UK.

The key finding of the study is that class is the most powerful indicator when it comes to the structure of cultural consumption in contemporary Britain, but other social factors such as age and gender are also important (ibid, 53-53). For instance, reading books, as well as the consumption of visual art and music, are defined by class, but tastes in music are even more defined by age, while preference in TV and regimes of body management are more defined by gender (ibid, 251). However, in contrast to Bourdieu’s original study, the primary tension identified is not between participation and consumption of ‘high’ or ‘popular’, ‘legitimate’ or ‘ordinary’ cultural forms but between participation and non-participation (ibid, 56). The data does establish the existence of omnivorousness, suggesting that a distinction between ‘legitimate’ and ‘ordinary’ culture no longer defines distinguishing forms of cultural participation which is a class asset. However, the data also shows that there are important tensions and key boundaries which are linked in part to class and educational qualification but also to age and ethnicity (ibid, 92-93). ‘There continue to be subtle divisions that middle-class omnivorous taste rarely crosses’ (ibid, 186), for example the distinction between jazz and ‘Dixieland jazz’, Radio 3 and the ‘chocolate box music’ on Classic FM (ibid, 187). Other fields are also defined by important internal tensions with, for instance, visual art remaining ‘a relatively exclusive field’ (ibid, 131).

The study finds that the social relations involved in contemporary cultural consumption are more defined by attitudes to the consumption than by the activity itself. So, for instance, while class difference has some impact on the types of television programmes viewed, the two key indicators in relation to television viewing are numbers of hours spent viewing TV, with 30% of the intermediate and 43% of the working classes watching 5 or more hours of TV on weekend days compared to 19% of the professional-executive class (ibid, 135). This is part explained by the social attitude to TV watching with relations of distinction ‘more likely to manifest themselves in the adoption of a pedagogic relation to television, treating it as a resource for self-

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2 In this finding the study disagrees with the findings of Chan and Goldthorpe in, for instance, their Arts Council funded study where they argue that economic relations are not important for participation, see for instance Chan and Goldthorpe, 2007 and Bunting, Chan, Goldthorpe, Keaney and Oskala 2008).

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education or self-improvement linked to the forms of self-mastery associated with not watching television’ (ibid, 137). Participation in cultures of ‘eating out’ is a widespread activity, however, the study finds that this is also highly compartmentalised by social group, social class followed by ethnicity and gender (ibid, 166).

Perhaps the key finding of the study is the pattern it finds of non-participation across cultural forms (apart from TV) within the working class. However, crucially the point is made that this does not equate to exclusion from cultural activity. While it is incontrovertible that ‘the relations between the educational qualifications, the occupational preferment of the professional-executive class, and their participation in, and liking for, particular cultural practices demonstrates their value as a distinctive class asset’ (ibid, 202), the study finds that working class exclusion from these practices is not felt as a deprivation (ibid, 204). Although, the qualitative study did not find the existence of a distinctive working class culture that the survey had not captured (ibid, 203); nevertheless, a strong argument is made for the need to differentiate between cultural engagement (captured by the survey) and wider forms of social engagement (ibid, 59).

Qualitative work allowed a more fine-tuned understanding of the activities not captured by the survey. For instance, a mother of three children under 5 living on a farm in Northern Ireland responded to the survey in a way which categorized her as culturally disengaged; however, the interview conducted with her revealed that she takes part in a range of activities not measured by the survey, including walking in the country, church, home entertainment and an active social life based on school networks (ibid., 60-61). Another example is from a Pakistani working class focus group in which a highly active cultural sphere is described which, while localized on the one hand, draws primarily from the Indian subcontinent but again encompasses activities not captured by the survey (ibid, 208-09).

Bennett et al. are aware of the ways in which the structure of the survey, interviews and focus groups can shape findings (see for discussion of this issue in relation to the methodology Silva and Wright, 2008). So for instance, while the project found that ethnicity is less important than class, education, age and gender for cultural consumption and participation, was this because the questions on tastes and preferences for genres were constructed in relation to particular cultural orientations? For instance, the example of an interview with an elderly Pakistani man in which it becomes clear ‘that most of his answers were given from a position outside many of our cultural referents’ (ibid, 237), is revealing. The particularity of the cultural referents used is also apparent when one looks at the choices of forms used in the survey – a book by African-American novelist Maya Angelo rather than the (more widely known) Alice Walker, for instance. Bennett et al. recognize that the interview responses need to be read in light of the discursive strategies of the interviewee (ibid) and in light of the ways in which surveys produce particular realities (Bennett, 2007).

Future work suggested by this research (or the missed opportunity here) is to insert location as a key category of analysis. Indeed the absence of geography as an important factor framing particular kinds of cultural engagements is notable. While geography is discussed in relation to cultural taste and ethnicity, as well as in terms of different geographic cultural references (see, for example, pp. 238 and 243-244), location is not discussed in any meaningful way in terms of the ways it may have effected some of the findings (although there is a very brief exploration of location in relation to omnivorousness and a recognition of the significance of region, ibid, 183-185). For instance, the study finds that people involved in the media are more voracious consumers of legitimate culture than people in higher education occupations (ibid., fig. 10.2); I wondered, though, whether that finding could be explained by the tendency for media people to
be employed in urban centres (London and Manchester, for instance) where access to legitimate cultural resources is relatively easy. Recent work done on the dataset produced by the evaluations of the Renaissance in the Regions programme examining school children visits to regional museums shows that location of school is a key indicator for museum visits (Hooper-Greenhill et al., 2006 and 2004). This finding was particularly important in attempting a more fine-grained understanding of the figures from the second study which showed that, perhaps counter-intuitively, there were higher numbers of museum visitations from school children located in areas of social deprivation (Hooper-Greenhill et al., 2006). Further research has revealed that, at least in part, this finding is a function of the co-location of schools from deprived areas and museums in inner city locations (Hooper-Greenhill et al., 2009).

Bourdieu’s theory of distinction argued that confident consumption and participation in a particular range of cultural forms and activities – ‘legitimate culture’ — gave a social advantage which could be converted into economic advantage. Bennett et al. do not find a widespread operation of the relations between social groupings and legitimate culture (although they do find that competence in legitimate culture is still important for certain elite sections of the population but, importantly, this was more critical for older groupings). However, they do find strong evidence that Bourdieu’s ground breaking theorisation of the relationality of cultural consumption and cultural resources (cultural capital, cultural field and social group) is useful in understanding social relations in contemporary Britain, but through an analysis which recognizes the intersection of age, gender and ethnicity with class.
Bibliography


