

Consumption and class

SAN266, week 4, March 13th, 2019

Premise: Ability of objects to communicate social position

- Not necessary through ownership – importance of **distribution and circulation** of goods for asserting status in some non-industrial societies (e.g. kula, potlach)
- **Consumption** as an important status-signifier: concept of **luxury goods** in both non-industrial and industrial societies, **taste as a class classifier** in industrial societies.

Veblen. Theory of Leisure Class

- Veblenesque approach was a way of filling economic behavior with specifically social motivations
- Social status is measured by **separation from everyday productive work**. Consumption of goods and time has to demonstrate this distance:
- **Trophy** – first consumer good. Ownership starts with women as trophies – the clearest sign that a man can appropriate production without participating in it.
- **Leisure**. Leisure does not mean passivity

Veblen. Theory of Leisure Class

- Lifestyle is created in order to distinguish leisure class from productive classes. In modern society it regulates relationships between classes
- Model of **emulation**– competitive mimicking of consumption patterns
- **Objects are able to demonstrate status, because they are part of the lifestyle of groups with high status.**
- Since goods can signify status, they can be also the means of status competition.
- Lower classes want to increase their status by mimicking style of higher classes. Higher classes respond is a change of style
- One of explanations of the dynamics of consumer culture

Veblen. Theory of Leisure Class

Critique of Veblen:

- Reduces social motivation to envy and repetition – desire to be equal with those who have higher status.
- Style is not only trickling down
- Mechanistic view on hierarchies and their reproduction

Work in groups:

Prepare one example of each:

1. An endeavour to distance oneself from productive work (historical or present)
2. An endeavour to show one's status through consumption of luxury goods (historical or present)
3. An endeavour to increase one's status through mimicking of higher classes (historical or present)

Veblen. Theory of Leisure Class

Veblen and com.:

- Modern and individual forms of identity are created through distinction; Ostentatious consumption vs ostentatious abstinence
- Consumers try to acquire **things** that can serve as **positional goods** – status symbols. Through acquisition and/or display of such goods they try to show or improve their position in social structure and confirm so social hierarchies and borders
- Later interpretive shift from mimicking to creation of distinction – consumption does not mark class differences, class differences are created through consumption.
- This discourse changes with Douglas and Isherwood (World of Goods) and Bourdieu (Distinction) - > **Objects as material means of social interaction and communication, as mechanism of social reproduction**

Bourdieu, 1979 *Distinction*

- There is relation between group identity, lifestyle and strategies of consumption
- Does not reduce consumption to some abstract sign system or reflection of pre-existent order
- Theory of practice: taste (cultural patterns of preferences and choices) is resource used by groups in order to create or keep their position in social order

Bourdieu, 1979 *Distinction*

- Bourdieu, 1979 *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*
- Kant, Critique of Judgement, 1790 – aesthetic (taste) judgements are individual and disinterested, based on formal qualities of object
- Bourdieu: taste is not individual and is not disinterested

Bourdieu, 1979 *Distinction*



Bourdieu, 1979 *Distinction*



- From art historian concept of culture (studying high arts) to anthropological concept of culture (studying way of life)
- Social position defined by a combination of economic and cultural capital.

Bourdieu, 1979 *Distinction*

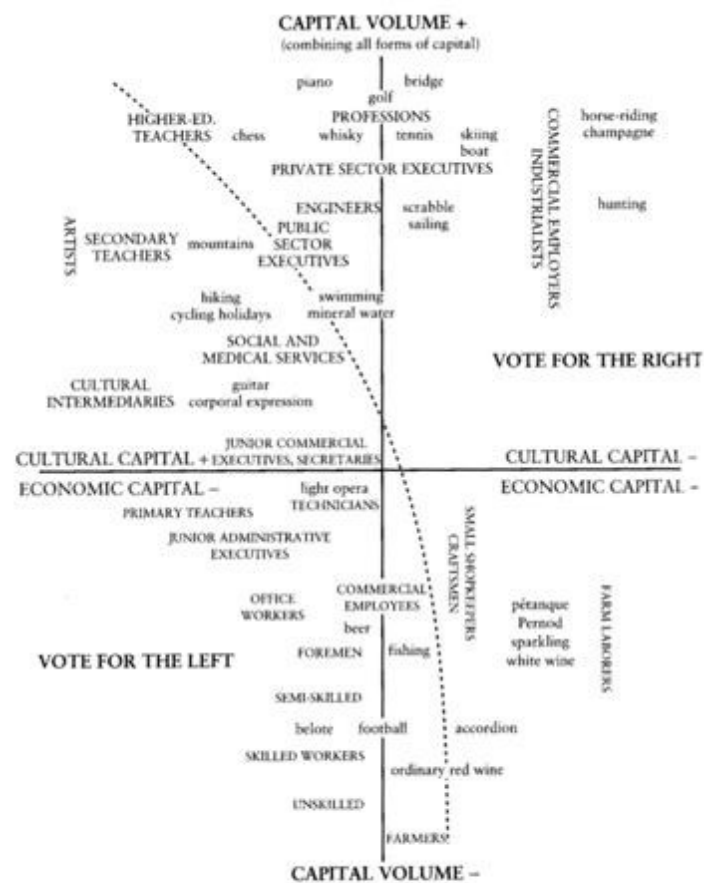


Figure 19.1 The space of social positions and the space of lifestyles (the dotted line indicates probable orientation toward the right or left)

Bourdieu, *Distinction*- Habitus

„system of durable, transposable, dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their goals without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends...“ Bourdieu, 1990, 53

- Inscribed to bodies through previous experience (culture is not gloves, it is skin)
- Unconscious
- Individual habitus is in a homological relation to class habitus (defined by economic and cultural capital)
- Individual habitus as creative tool of classification reproduces these forms of capital.

Bourdieu, *Distinction*- taste and symbolic power

- Taste is subjective realization of habitus. Through taste habitus organizes consumption and lifestyle
- Expressed in the language of individual preferences
- „marries colours and also people, who make „well-matched couples“, initially in regards to taste.“ Bourdieu, 1984, s. 243

Taste as symbolic power - Culture is a battlefield of class struggle:

- Hierarchies of legitimacy - Whose taste (in terms of class) will be considered legitimate
- Hierarchies of hierarchies – whose test within dominant class will be legitimate (higher cultural or economic capital)

Bourdieu, 1979 *Distinction*

- Distinction – key term
- Meanings and usage of things is a tool for getting distinctions within the hierarchy of social relations.
- Taste classifies classifier
- Human experience and practice as mimesis and embodiment
- Not a classification of objects, but classification of various structures of tastes and sets of expectations related to preferences of various groups of people
- Differential distribution of social conditions

Critique

- Too concentrated on cultural goods in terms of arts
- Static, does not enable interpretation of change, economically reductionist
- Romantisation of working class
- Is not intersectionalist – does not think of gender, ethnicity, and age
- Omnivores – higher classes consume goods of lower classes

Featherstone: Consumer Culture and Postmodernism

- Habitus is static – is created during primary socialization
- People have higher agency in consumption – they have to interpret and act their preferences in changing conditions. That changes their social positions, relations and lifestyles

An individual work:

1. Write a short annotation (10 sentences) of the text you read for today's lesson.

Group work:

- How the state and national economy influence consumption?
- How the authors describe consumption in relation to class?

Group assignment 1

- Write 3 examples of objects related to the position of person in a social hierarchy (e.g. rank, class)
- What mechanism connects person – object and social position in your examples?