After omnivorousness: Is Bourdieu still relevant?

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Enter omnivorosity, exit Bourdieu?

Supported by ample empirical evidence, the omnivore thesis has unarguably become the dominant paradigm in the sociology of taste (Peterson 2005; Lizardo 2008; Warde et al 2008). In Peterson’s (1997: 87) influential formulation, being “high status” no longer requires being “snobbish,” but “means having cosmopolitan ‘omnivorous’ tastes.” In this way, “aesthetics of elite status” have been “…redefined as the appreciation of all distinctive leisure activities…along with the appreciation of the fine arts” (1992: 252). DiMaggio and Mukhtar (2004: 171) echo this sentiment in noting that the “new cultural capitalists are the ‘omnivores,’ men and women who are comfortable speaking about and participating in high and popular culture and everything in between…[high] status now inheres in cosmopolitanism and broadly inclusive tastes” (DiMaggio and Mukhtar 2004: 189).

The omnivore/univore thesis has in many ways displaced or become a strong competitor to Bourdieu’s theory of taste as the central organizing framework for empirical work in the field. The question that emerges is: What is the relationship between the new paradigm and the previously dominant one?

Most contemporary researchers frame the omnivore thesis as a surprising and unexpected empirical pattern given the context of particular interpretations of Bourdieu’s work on class and lay aesthetics, which allegedly proposes a clear-cut division between the fine arts and popular culture, and thus suggests that cultural elites would invariably reject the latter types of cultural goods (Bryson 1996; Chan and Goldthorpe...
Thus, Peterson notes in this regard that the findings associated with omnivorousness are in “...dramatic difference from the earlier findings by Pierre Bourdieu in France” (2005: 260, italics added). Vander Stichele and Laermans categorically conclude that in spite of the influence of Bourdieu's early research, “...it is questionable whether his theoretical framework still corresponds to contemporary social reality.” They reach this conclusion based on the fact that “...empirical doubts have been raised regarding Bourdieu's claim that the bourgeoisie or dominant class primarily affirms its high social status via the public and private consumption of so-called high or legitimate culture” (2006: 45-46).

Van Eijck proposes that “Bourdieu's notion that a high status implies snobbery and, thereby, a consistent aversion to popular culture, has been inadequate for decades, at least outside France” (2001: 1164, italics added). Chan and Goldthorpe (2007: 14) are the most forceful, concluding that “[w]e would ally ourselves with proponents of the omnivore-univore argument who claim that, whatever validity the ideas of symbolic ‘struggle’ and ‘violence’, as advanced by Bourdieu and his followers, may have had for the earlier history of modern societies, they appear out of place the contemporary world.” This entire line of reception is aptly summarized by Coulangeon and Lemel (2007:94) when they note that “[t]he increasing renown of this new theoretical construct

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1 Also see Bellavance (2008:2), Lopez-Sintas and Katz-Gerro (2005:300), and Veenstra (2005:261) for other examples this interpretation of the inadequacy of Bourdieu's theory of taste to account for omnivorous taste patterns.
Bourdieu’s Theory of Taste Revisited

As suggested by the passages quoted above, one of the major rationalizations offered to justify the diagnosis of the increasing irrelevance of Bourdieu in the wake of the discovery of “omnivore” patterns of cultural choice involves the claim that two basic presuppositions stand at the center of Bourdieu’s theory of taste:

Proposition 1: The primary way in which “high status” people consume culture according to Bourdieu and the evidence that he presents can be characterized as snobbish exclusiveness: that is, “high status” people dislike more things than low status people, and in particular, they dislike the popular culture that the working classes consume (Bryson 1996; Chan and Goldthorpe 2007a, 2007b; Erickson 1996).

Therefore,

Proposition 2: Distinction is primarily a book about how “high status” people use “highbrow” culture to draw symbolic boundaries that separate them from “low status” people and their “lowbrow” cultural taste.

In what follows we propose that, contrary to popular opinion, neither of these claims are at the center of Bourdieu’s overall argument.
Is high-status exclusiveness a key element of Bourdieu’s theory of taste?

Rather than being self-evident, it is at the very least curious that the omnivore thesis is considered so at odds with Bourdieu’s theory of taste as to make it completely irrelevant for the current situation. Interestingly, in their influential article, Peterson and Kern (1996: 904) never took their findings to imply a refutation of Bourdieu, but simply a partial reformulation. They were careful to note that Bourdieu’s theory is perfectly consistent with a notion of “…discriminating omnivorousness,” provided that “…the ethnocentrism central to snobbish elitism is replaced by cultural relativism.” Peterson and Kern (1996: 904) do seem to provide ammunition for current misinterpretations, however, when they add that when Bourdieu differentiates between working-class and “high status” aesthetic consumption practices, he tends to portray the latter “…in ways that most easily fit a monolithic symbolic landscape appropriate to the era of the elitist snob.” Nevertheless, we argue that Peterson and Kern’s ultimate verdict as to the compatibility of their findings with Bourdieu’s taste theory is ambiguous at best, a conclusion that is at odds with the “death knell” interpretation regarding the consequences of high-status omnivorousness for Bourdieu’s theory of taste.

In her equally influential article, Bryson (1996: 886) provides a more clear cut example of what has become the dominant line of interpretation of Bourdieu’s argument. In developing what she refers to as the “high status exclusiveness” hypothesis, she notes that according to Bourdieu “[t]he crux of symbolic exclusion is dislike…and exclusion is more important to high status individuals than to others” (italics added). Most
subsequent evaluations of Bourdieu's theory have tended to focus on this aspect of Bryson's interpretation of Bourdieu, which requires the strong claim that elites express dislikes more liberally than do individuals in the dominated class. But is this an accurate interpretation of Bourdieu's substantive claims in *Distinction*?

The following commonly-referenced passage in *Distinction* appears to be consonant with this now standard interpretation:

Tastes (i.e. manifested preferences) are the practical affirmation of an inevitable difference. It is no accident that, when they have to be justified, they are asserted purely negatively, by the refusal of other tastes. In matters of taste, more than anywhere else, all determination is negation; and tastes are perhaps first and foremost distastes...The most intolerable thing for those who regard themselves as the possessors of legitimate culture is the sacrilegious reuniting of tastes which taste dictates shall be separated (Bourdieu 1984: 56-57, quoted in Bryson 1996: 886).

This appears to confirm propositions (1) and (2) above: dominant class members express lots of distastes, and (by implication) those rejected tastes have to be those which are more likely to be expressed by individuals in the dominated class.

We suggest, however, that such a reading represents a fundamental *misreading* of the argument. First, it is not logically necessary to go from Bourdieu's conditional generalization regarding the role of the negation of other tastes as one of the primary ways that aesthetic choices are *justified* to the empirical claim that one “class” of
individuals is more likely to express dislikes than another. Bourdieu is actually talking about the ways that taste operates for *all classes*, and nowhere does he say that taste justification through the negation of other tastes is going to be the exclusive (or even statistically more likely) purview of dominant classes. Instead, he posits that this cultural boundary drawing mechanism via negation of different tastes operates equally across all classes and serves to produce (and re-produce) divisions across the *entire* social field.

This interpretation is supported by the fact that Bourdieu continues the above passage by noting that: “Aesthetic intolerance can be terribly violent. Aversion to different lifestyles is perhaps one of the strongest barriers between the classes; class endogamy is evidence of this.” Notice that Bourdieu speaks of aversion to different lifestyles as a purview of *all classes* without singling out elites, which is the reason why he uses class endogamy as an empirical index of this fact (Illouz 1998:248). Recent research that shows that cultural dislikes are more evenly distributed across the class structure of the contemporary U.S. than was initially surmised in Bryson’s research (e.g. Tampubolon 2008: 252) are thus consistent with Bourdieu’s original proposal.

The second part of the quote, however, appears to claim unequivocally that “high status” people are more averse to the “…sacrilegious reuniting of tastes which taste

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2 That would imply that one class is chronically obliged to justify their tastes more often, and according to Bourdieu high status classes would be less likely to be required to justify their tastes, since these are taken to be naturally better and therefore require little justification.
dictates shall be separated,” apparently serving to categorically establish proposition (2) above.

This reading, however, is incomplete at best. Most commentators and empirical researchers read Bourdieu’s phrase “possessors of legitimate culture” as denoting “high status” people, but this is not quite the case. Bourdieu continues: “[t]his means that the games of artists and aesthetes and their struggles for the monopoly of artistic legitimacy are less innocent than they seem … The artist’s lifestyle is always a challenge thrown at the bourgeois life-style” (Bourdieu 1984: 57, italics added).

In this context, it becomes clear that by “possessors of legitimate culture” Bourdieu meant cultural producers, in particular the producers of the aesthetic goods valued by members of the bourgeoisie, or what Goffman (1951:303-304) referred to as “curator groups,” not “high status” classes, as has been assumed in standard readings. Furthermore, the “aversion” that this group displays to the “mixing” of tastes is not directed downwards to the “lower” classes, but instead horizontally toward the only fraction of the dominant class that would unambiguously deserve to be called “high status,” namely the bourgeoisie, or members of the temporally dominant professions, and owners and managerial staff of the larger industries.

For Bourdieu, cultural and symbolic producers, who display the most self-consciously aesthetic “stylization of life” (in Weber’s [1994:114] sense), are always on the lookout to keep their consumption practices “pure,” not from the possible influence of the “lower” classes (who are too far away in social space and lack the
requisite symbolic capital to be any real threat), but from the economically powerful or the truly dominant (“high status”) classes who are closer to them in social space and therefore represent much more of a threat. These attempts at “distinction” on the part of the “cultural bourgeoisie” have little to do with “high status snobbery,” if this is defined as an austere rejection of everything but the most “refined” pursuits. Instead, this is a rejection of the impeding commercialization and standardization of initially “alternative” lifestyle choices developed by groups of cultural producers as a self-conscious rejection of the “instrumental rationality” of the market (Bourdieu 1983; Lamont 1992).

This largely horizontal boundary-drawing dynamic is incomprehensible given the mistaken understanding of Distinction as suggesting only a dominant/dominated class difference, which (as we elaborate below) implicitly rests on a unidimensional conception of class differentiation. This interpretation is fundamentally at odds with Bourdieu’s multidimensional conception of social space. Instead, as Bourdieu unequivocally noted, “[e]xplicit aesthetic choices are in fact often constituted in opposition to the choices of the groups closest in social space, with whom the competition is most direct and most immediate” (Bourdieu 1984: 60, italics added).

To support the claim that Distinction’s primary focus is on the “cultured” classes’ rejection of “lower” class culture, most researchers cite the “beautiful photographs” experimental survey, the results of which are reported in the first chapter of Distinction (1984:36-37). The basic claim is that here Bourdieu attempts to provide empirical evidence that the “cultured” classes unconditionally reject the tastes of the working
classes, from whom they wish to “distinguish” themselves. Because of the importance that this material has acquired in interpretations of Bourdieu’s theory of taste, we turn to a consideration of it next. We show that this example has been largely misread by current commentators, and that its implications for understanding the relationship between class and lifestyle choices have therefore been largely under-exploited (but see Holt 1997).

**What makes a beautiful photograph?**

The “beautiful photographs” quasi-experimental survey was designed to ascertain the extent to which the “aesthetic disposition” (the ability to take an “aesthetic stance” towards everyday life objects and not yet officially legitimated cultural goods; more fully defined below) was unequally distributed among the different class fractions.

Bourdieu’s results are usually interpreted as implying that the higher status classes “refuse” the tastes of popular admiration, and therefore high-status (or “cultured”) individuals should be expected to be more exclusive in their tastes (Bryson 1996: 886). For instance, Bourdieu (1984: 35) himself notes that “[t]he higher the level of education, the greater is the proportion of respondents who, when asked whether a series of objects would make beautiful photographs, refuse the ordinary objects of popular admiration…as ‘vulgar’ or ‘ugly’” (quoted in Bryson 1996: 886). To the best of our

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3 In a preliminary survey subjects were shown actual photographs before being asked: “Given the following subjects, is a photographer more likely to produce a beautiful, interesting, meaningless or ugly photo: a landscape, a car crash, [pebbles, a pregnant woman] etc.?" In the large-scale survey the interviewers simply named the objects.
knowledge, this is the paradigmatic example in the literature on taste and culture consumption in which the “snob thesis” imputed to Bourdieu is supported with empirical results.

However, this is not the only possible or even most reasonable reading of the evidence that Bourdieu presents. Notice that while Bourdieu claims that high status people are relatively more likely to reject the objects of working class admiration as being capable of making a beautiful photograph in comparison to other objects, he does not claim the following two things, which would be logically required for the pure “snob thesis” to hold: (1) that high-status persons rejected more objects as capable of being beautiful than working class persons and (2) that working class and petit bourgeois persons did not reject the objects chosen by high-status individuals. The first claim is necessary to support the “highbrow snobbishness” thesis, and the second to support the “differential highbrow exclusiveness” thesis -- the claim that high status people are more likely to express dislikes than are low status people (Bryson 1996).

However, Bourdieu did not claim (1) and (2) above because his data contradict these assertions, and he was well aware of it (Holt 1997:100; Prieur, Rosenlund, and Skjott-Larsen 2008:50). First, in regards to (1) above, the results from the beautiful photographs survey show that while it is true that high status informants were statistically more likely to reject the objects of popular admiration (a first communion, a

4 We have seen in this last regard that Bourdieu thought of the expression of dislikes as common to all classes in their attempts to draw symbolic boundaries, or “fences” (Douglas and Isherwood 1996) between themselves and other classes.
sunset) in comparison to their endorsement of other objects, they selected *more* objects as capable of being considered beautiful than did working class respondents. In other words, high cultural capital respondents were able to make use of their greater command of the “aesthetic disposition” to extend the adjective “beautiful” (and thus aesthetically acceptable) to a *wider range* of objects than were working class respondents. In turn, low status respondents showed a much more *restricted* capacity to deem unconventional objects as beautiful, thus *deeming a larger number of objects as incapable of being aestheticized* in comparison to respondents with high education backgrounds.

Second, it is clear from Bourdieu’s interview data that working class informants rejected most of the “mundane” objects chosen by high-cultural-capital respondents as capable of making a beautiful photograph, and were fairly vocal in saying so (Bourdieu 1984: 44-47). This undermines the canonical interpretation of Bourdieu’s argument: that elites are *more likely* to be exclusionary, and that this exclusion is primarily directed toward the “bottom” of the status order. Instead, Bourdieu suggests and finds that cultural boundaries are drawn by both the upper class (vis a vis the working class *habitus*) and the working class (vis a vis “Bourgeois” tastes and values). He refers to the working class contrarian stance toward aestheticized goods and performances as an “*anti*-Kantian aesthetic” (Bourdieu 1984: 41-51). This stance subordinates “form to function” and practicality (Bourdieu 1984: 42), thus inherently conflicting with the formalist aestheticism of the cultured classes, for whom form and content are in principle separable, giving any object the potential to have the “aura” of the work of art as long as
it is (re)presented aesthetically. These latter class fractions are more likely to accept formal aesthetic experimentation on the part of artistic producers for its own sake, rather than tying it to a practical purpose and thus rejecting it as pointless.

The emergence of widespread misconceptions regarding the core argument of *Distinction* appears even more puzzling in light of the fact that the entire book is sprinkled with quantitative survey evidence that contradicts the notion that high-status classes were shown to be “snobs,” and which demonstrates that French respondents were already in the 1960s behaving as one would expect given the theoretical framework laid out by DiMaggio (1987), or the findings reported for American respondents of the same era by Wilensky (1964). That is, highly educated respondents (especially those whose educational capital outweighed their economic capital) consumed more culture of all forms, displayed more cultural knowledge of theater, painting and cinema, and reported engaging in more activities (highbrow and “middlebrow”) than respondents of lower educational standing. The empirical evidence that Bourdieu presents throughout the study demonstrates that he did not conceive of high status consumers as “snobs.”

The “beautiful photograph” data reveal an even bigger surprise for proponents of the standard portrayal of the argument laid out in *Distinction*. Bourdieu reports that

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5 For example, Bourdieu reports that “cinema-going,” a putatively “popular” or in Bourdieu’s terms’ “less consecrated” activity, is directly related to education, urban-residence, income and youth (1984: 26). These are the same correlations that scores of subsequent studies have found in more recent data in relation to popular consumption activities akin to going to the movies. Thus there is nothing “unusual” (or particularly “French”) about Bourdieu’s 1960s sample of respondents.
there is indeed a class fraction that is “…most inclined to say that all the objects mentioned could make a beautiful photograph” (Bourdieu 1984: 61). We interpret this as a fairly “open-minded” attitude toward aesthetic appreciation consistent with the “intellectualized aestheticism” that Peterson and Kern (1996: 904) see as responsible for the rise of omnivore taste among dominant classes. This group is contrary to the standard high status snob reading of *Distinction*, itself part of the “high status” class (or at least we would like to believe): *higher education teachers*. This is the group, along with “[t]he intellectuals [and the] artists, [who] seem to hesitate between systematic refusal of what can only be, at best, a middle-brow art [photography], and a *selective acceptance which manifests the universality of their culture and their aesthetic disposition*” (Bourdieu 1984: 60, italics added).

These high cultural capital respondents’ propensity to consider a wide variety of objects as being deserving of aesthetic appreciation, as Peterson (1992) has argued and as we elaborate below, is the dispositional basis of “cosmopolitan” omnivore taste (Holt 1997, 1998). As Bourdieu (1984: 40) notes in perfect agreement with this view, this generalized aesthetic disposition should be the primary focus of attention since “…nothing most rigorously distinguishes the different classes than the disposition objectively demanded by the legitimate consumption of legitimate works…and the…capacity to constitute aesthetically objects that are ordinary or even ‘common’ or to apply the principles of a ‘pure’ aesthetic in the most everyday choices of everyday life….” Bourdieu considered the “tolerant” capacity to transpose the aesthetic
disposition to different realms as differently distributed across class fractions, and in this respect he is in agreement with most contemporary interpretations of the omnivore taste evidence (Peterson 1992; Bryson 1996; Emmison 2003; Ollivier 2004; Warde et al 2008).

Consider, for instance, the main (when it comes to arts participation and cultural choices) piece of empirical analysis in Distinction, a multiple correspondence analysis (MCA) of various measures of arts consumption and cultural competence along with a select set of sociodemographic markers (Bourdieu 1984: 260-267). Does Bourdieu find that the “cultured” classes, the keepers of “legitimate culture”—and the ones most likely to be attracted to “…the works demanding the ‘purest’ aesthetic disposition” (263)—are incorrigible snobs who summarily reject middlebrow culture? The answer is no. Instead he notes that these class fractions are the ones “…most capable of applying this aesthetic disposition to less consecrated areas, such as song or cinema…” (italics added) and are also “…interested in abstract painting, visit the Modern Art Museum and expect their friends to be artistic” (263). If that does not sound like a description of the taste patterns of cosmopolitan omnivores, we are at a loss as to what would constitute it.

For Bourdieu, the “puzzling” phenomenon that there existed certain class fractions (those endowed with the most cultural capital from the family environment) who appear to be systematically (and routinely) able to extend their aesthetic disposition away from “the most legitimate areas” of cultural practice in order to consume products hailing from less artistically legitimate cultural sectors, constituted
one of the two core findings reported in Distinction (or one of the “two basic facts”
established by the investigation), and Bourdieu was very clear in saying so (Bourdieu
1984: 13). What is surprising about this, given the contemporary opposition between
Bourdieu and omnivorousness, is that the differential social distribution of this
competence is precisely what is thought to be behind the empirical phenomenon of
omnivorousness (Peterson and Kern 1996, Holt 1998, Ollivier 2008). Accordingly, the
claim that Bourdieu’s theory of taste is incapable of addressing this phenomenon loses
most of its force, given the fact that the ability of the cultured classes to incorporate less
legitimate cultural forms into their consumption repertoire is one of the core empirical
findings that Bourdieu’s theory taste is designed to explain (Bourdieu 1984: 63).

Is Bourdieu’s “homology” thesis compatible with omnivorousness?
The conception of a high-status exclusive consumption pattern represents the first facet
of the received view that has marred the understanding of Distinction. The second facet
revolves around the stubborn but largely unsubstantiated claim that the core of the book
deals with the contrast between dominant classes versus the dominated classes. This
part of the standard account is particularly damaging, since it has prevented an
understanding and empirical assessment of Bourdieu’s actual class theory (as he had
hoped when speculating about possible cross-national extensions of his class-theoretical
framework [Bourdieu 1991a, 1991b, 1991c]). Further, it has resulted in the diffusion of a

6 The other core finding being the less surprising fact that there exist widespread
and substantial education-related differences in knowledge and consumption across all
cultural practices.
conception of Bourdieu's theory of class as primarily relying on a dichotomous (or single linear continuum) view of classes revolving around a single axis of stratification.

For instance, Chan and Goldthorpe (2007), using micro-level data for a representative sample of the British population, purport to test Bourdieu’s “homology” thesis, which they claim implies the existence of a single “dominant class” that only consumes high status culture and rejects all of the rest. Not surprisingly, their data fail to support this hypothesis, instead showing that high status people consume both popular and traditionally high status culture. From these results they conclude that Bourdieu’s homology thesis is wrong and represents an outdated view of the relationship between social position and culture consumption in modern societies.

Chan and Goldthorpe’s research is exemplary of the various fallacies and misunderstandings regarding Bourdieu’s theory of taste that we have attempted to highlight in this paper. Not only do they fatally misunderstand what Bourdieu meant by “homology,” and thus interpret Bourdieu’s theory in the traditional manner as implying an impregnable separation of high and popular culture, but they uncritically attribute to Bourdieu the standard dichotomous reading of the class structure of late-modern societies as consistent of a binary separating “high-status” from “low-status” classes, and which Bourdieu spent the bulk of Distinction trying to do away with.

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As argued by some commentators (Wacquant 2005:140-146; Lizardo 2006b; DiMaggio 1979:1465) and in Bourdieu’s most synaptic (and didactic) attempts to present his class theory (Bourdieu 1990:122-134), Bourdieu thought of the class structure of late modern societies as divided by both horizontal and vertical boundaries. While in most empirical applications Bourdieu worked (for both theoretical and methodological reasons) with a bi-dimensional space, he never suggested that there were only two dimensions to this space (in Distinction he speaks of a “three-dimensional space”), only that due to historical reasons, these two dimensions had become the most important in late modern societies (Bourdieu 1996; Wacquant 2005). This is of course an empirical claim that can be put to the test. Bourdieu presents his bi-dimensional models as follows: “….agents are distributed within [multidimensional space], in the first dimension, according to the overall volume of capital that they possess and, in the second dimension, according to the composition of their capital –i.e., according to the relative weight of the different assets within their total assets” (Bourdieu 1985:724).

Bourdieu’s multidimensional account, in particular his emphasis on the “chiastic structure” of the dominant class, separates the anti-bourgeois aestheticism of the cultural producers from the ambivalent attitude (Bourdieu 1984: 316) towards the arts and intellectual matters (removed from the profit motive) of members of the “temporally dominant” occupations and the business-oriented classes, and both of these from the sometimes dismissive attitude toward the most ethereal artistic pursuits demonstrated

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7 For an excellent summary of Bourdieu’s class theory see Weininger (2005)
by the large employers, high-skill technicians, and business managers (Bourdieu 1984; Erickson 1996).

For Bourdieu, this rift between “artists” and “Bourgeois” (Bourdieu 1984: 176) lifestyles and consumption practices was at the core of cultural conflict and the contest for “symbolic capital” in the larger struggle for symbolic recognition in the class field. Furthermore, Bourdieu theorizes that since in late-modern societies, cultural (educational) capital continues to be subordinate to the market logic of profit represented by economic capital, those whose only claim to standing rest on cultural (educational) capital (the “dominated” fraction of the dominant class) would tend to develop oppositional attitudes to the status quo and would attempt to use their facility and greater dominance of cultural and symbolic resources to mark their difference from members of the dominant class.

That is, regardless of the specific historical and institutional arrangements that serve to define certain patterns of culture consumption as high status (or in specific historical or cross-national redefinitions of the high-status/low-status boundary [DiMaggio 1991]), the homology thesis would predict that we should find that the position of each occupational status group on a multidimensional space composed of lifestyle practices should be largely derivable from their position in the objective hierarchy of cultural and economic resources.
As Wacquant (2000: 115) notes:

To uncover the social logic of consumption thus requires establishing, not a direct link between a given practice and a particular class category (e.g. horseback riding and the gentry), but the structural correspondences that obtain between two constellations of relations, the space of lifestyles and the space of social positions occupied by the different groups (italics added).

Yet, most contemporary analysts have ignored this conception of what the homology thesis implies. They have thus chided Bourdieu for a “prediction” that he in fact never made and have produced data that “contradicts” a homology thesis—high status classes consume “high-status” cultural products—that Bourdieu in fact never stated in that naïve form. For instance, Coulangeoun and Lemel (2007: 108) conclude that “our results do not concur with the strict understanding of the homology thesis: highbrow taste in music only concerns a minority, and ‘pure’ highbrow music fans appear to be very rare, even in high-status groups.” Verdaasdonk claims that “the homology thesis predicts that the higher the degree of ‘cultural legitimacy’ of a product, the greater the chance that it will be preferred by members of the dominating class; conversely, the lower a product’s ‘cultural legitimacy’, the greater the chance that it will appeal to the tastes of members of the dominated class” (2003: 359).

These conclusions only make sense when “homology” is interpreted in its naïve sense as implying a one-to-one correspondence between an allegedly unidimensional hierarchy of cultural goods and an equally unidimensional social hierarchy of positions. DeNooy’s characterization of homology as “the projection of one space onto another,
which is deemed possible because they reflect the same basic (i.e., objective) relations, namely, the distribution of different kinds of capital or power” (2003: 313), is consistent with Bourdieu’s intention. However, this more sophisticated notion of homology has played almost no role in driving current research and theory in the sociology of taste. This is in line with recent proposals who have questioned the wisdom of the persistent focus of the sociology of taste on the question of whether high-status people dislike low status cultures, since “one could equally ask the question whether high-status people dislike each other’s cultures” (Tampubolon 2008: 260). We argue that this last issue is precisely what was at the center of Bourdieu’s theoretical project; and this is precisely what Bourdieu finds in the main piece of empirical analysis in *Distinction* (1984: 260-267).

**Omnivorousness and the aesthetic disposition**

Most analysts fail to appreciate the fact that Bourdieu's theory of taste constitutes a *cognitive sociology* of class differences in aesthetic dispositions (Lizardo and Skiles 2012). As such, the contemporary relevance of the theory cannot be fully estimated—short of devolving into pseudo-Veblenian platitudes—without noting the role that the notion of the *aesthetic disposition* plays in it. For Bourdieu, the aesthetic disposition was a *generalized* cognitive scheme (a set of habits of perception and appreciation) whose origins were class-marked (because it is mainly fostered in the domestic and scholastic environments). Habitual, long-lasting command of the aesthetic disposition provides members of culturally privileged class fractions with the ability to
extend and transpose the “aesthetic” form of appreciation initially reserved for symbolic goods produced in the fine-arts field (artistically “legitimate” according to Bourdieu), to any and all objects, including common—and less legitimate—ones. This is the proper theoretical interpretation of the “beautiful photographs” data from the point of view of the practice theory. For instance, Bourdieu defines the aesthetic disposition as “the capacity to consider in and for themselves, as form rather than function, not only the works designated for such apprehension, i.e., legitimate works of art, but everything in the world, including cultural objects which are not yet consecrated” (Bourdieu 1984: 3, italics added).

It is this propensity to transpose the cognitive scheme toward new objects and not the propensity to fix the scheme on its initial prototypical objects (e.g. fine art) that is the key marker of distinction according to Bourdieu. The capacity for permanent extension of the aesthetic disposition (and constant deployment toward the assimilation of new cultural objects) thus accounts for class differences in the quality and quantity of cultural choices. This also explains the phenomenon noted by Bourdieu and subsequent researchers of differences in engagement with all forms of arts among members of specific high and middle status occupations, such as primary and secondary education teachers and other cultural and symbolic producers (Bourdieu 1984; DiMaggio and Useem 1978:188).

The aesthetic disposition is primarily constituted by the ability to perceptually separate content (or function) from form during everyday aesthetic judgments. Because
aesthetic judgments (and thus "acceptance" of given aesthetic forms) are seen as driven by formal and not “substantive” (or content-based) considerations, those who wield the aesthetic disposition are (socio)logically inclined to consider a wider variety of aesthetic objects, contents, and performances as capable of being “beautiful” and thus likely to be appreciated (Holt 1998). Accordingly, one way to “save” Bourdieu’s theory from its critics has been precisely to disengage the “content” of cultural capital from its form (Holt 1997; Bryson 1996). According to this view, while Bourdieu might have been wrong about the content of cultural capital (specific forms of high status pursuits) he was right about its form (aestheticized appreciation).

While we summarily agree that aestheticized appreciation is the key to Bourdieu’s notion of cultural capital, we disagree with the claim that Bourdieu was wrong as to the “content” of cultural capital. The reason for this is that suggesting the separation of content and form is a way to “save” the theory belies a key misunderstanding. It is precisely the ability and competence required to separate content from form that is at the basis of the set of class-distributed cognitive schemes that have become valuable for providing “multicultural capital” (Bryson 1996; DiMaggio and Mukhtar 2004; Emmison 2003). Bourdieu’s theory of taste was “formal” since its original formulation, and thus hardly requires this particular reinterpretation to be saved.

This separation of aesthetic form from content, rather than being required as an analytical move on the part of the theorist to fix the (presumably broken) theory, is
precisely what needs to be explained by any sociological theory of cultural appreciation, since—as Bourdieu notes—it is what lay actors who belong to class fractions rich in cultural capital routinely do as a matter of course (Illouz 1998:240; Holt 1997:108, 110-11). This is consistent with DiMaggio’s (DiMaggio 1991:144) observation that “The role of formal education in…[the contemporary] social structure is, as Bourdieu has argued, to inculcate *not tastes per se* but a capacity for aesthetic adaptation” (italics added), a capacity that has become even more crucial for the culturally privileged in the context of increasing geographic mobility (Griswold and Wright 2004; van Eijck 2000:221).

As we have argued, Bourdieu demonstrates in *Distinction* that increasing ability to separate content from form most clearly evinced by members of cultural-capital rich occupational groups (socio)logically implies *the generalization of aesthetic appreciation to a wide variety of possible contents*. This “aesthetic disposition” can then be thought of as a “transposable scheme” (Bourdieu 1984:28) analytically distinguishable from whatever content this disposition was applied to. It is the constant deployment of this scheme by the “cultured” class fractions which takes aesthetic acceptability away from a consideration of what is presented and toward how any content could in principle be (re)presented (Bourdieu 1984).

Because the “cultured” class fractions are also the ones most likely to transpose this scheme to multiple contents, exposure to the material conditions that facilitate its early acquisition both in the household and in the formal educational system is bound to
produce a more “liberal” aptitude to extend the blanket of potential aesthetic value to a wider variety of objects and cultural products (as shown by the beautiful photographs data). This is in contrast to the anti-Kantian working class aesthetic that reduces form to functionality, does not separate the object represented from the manner in which it is presented, and which thus rejects most attempts at formal experimentation (Bourdieu 1984: 32-34).

This account explains the social rarity (Peterson and Rossman 2008; Olliver 2008: 134) of restricting the aesthetic disposition only to the domain of institutionally prescribed aesthetic goods (what Peterson has referred to as the “snob” ideal type). In Bourdieu’s account, the more self-assured a person is in his or her command of the aesthetic disposition, the more likely it is that they will attempt to extend it to non-traditional objects (Bourdieu 1984: 63). Thus, in Bourdieu’s scheme “snobbery,” as traditionally defined in the sociology of taste—liking only institutionally prescribed cultural goods or what Ollivier (2008: 124) refers to as “exclusive highbrows”—rather than being a marker of the highest form of aesthetic appreciation, is in fact a clear signal of the late acquisition of the aesthetic disposition. Sole consumption of the fine-arts to the exclusion of less legitimate forms is thus characteristic of the “safe” investments made by those who enter the rank of the cultured classes from less-privileged backgrounds, and whose primary source of exposure to the aesthetic disposition happens through formal schooling (Bourdieu 1984: 65).
Finally, since the essence of the “popular aesthetic” consists in precisely the negation that content can be separated from form (Bourdieu 1984: 32-34), “univore” consumption (Bryson 1997) also follows as a (socio)logical implication, since it is unlikely that the same content (stylistic, aural, linguistic, etc.) will be found in different artistic genres, such as rap and country music (Lizardo and Skiles 2012). This means that as we move down the educational attainment and the “inherited cultural capital” (e.g. parental education) ladder, and as the chances of deploying the aesthetic disposition concomitantly decrease, we should find that the “openness” of the person to a wide variety of aesthetic experiences will decrease. This same pattern of “univorous” rejection of “artistic” forms is precisely what Bourdieu found in his beautiful photograph experimental survey (Bourdieu 1984). This is also exactly what contemporary researchers find in regard to other forms of consumption of the popular and fine arts among culturally disadvantaged groups (Blasius and Friedrichs 2008; Trondman 1990; Bryson 1997).

Conclusion

In contrast to the received picture of Distinction as an outmoded and irrelevant work, we have shown that both the theoretical and empirical patterns reported in Distinction continue to have relevance for contemporary theory and research in the sociology of taste, and in many ways represent a largely under-exploited resource. In particular, we argue that Bourdieu’s account may help us shed further light on the phenomenon of high-status omnivorousness (Peterson 1992; Peterson and Kern 1996). As such our aim
has been neither to create artificial divisions between theoretical schools nor to attempt
to “reduce” all subsequent work to a Bourdieuan “master scheme,” but to show how
Bourdieu’s original findings and more recent theoretical proposals and empirical
discoveries (Peterson 1992; Lamont 1992; Holt 1998) are complementary and capable of
being integrated, once we get past the original misunderstandings that block
appreciation of the relevance of Bourdieu’s work for the contemporary situation.
References


