BOURDIEU’S THEORY OF TASTES

Across a diverse range of substantive studies, Pierre Bourdieu has synthesized Weberian, Marxist, Durkheimian, and phenomenological traditions to argue for a model of social organization, the generative mechanism for which is competition for various types of capital within social fields. In Distinction (Bourdieu 1984), arguably the most important application of this grand theoretical project, Bourdieu describes how these various capitals operate in the social fields of consumption. I first review briefly Bourdieu’s key concepts and then discuss how the theory addresses the limitations of Warnerian social class research.

Bourdieu argues that social life can be conceived as a multidimensional status game in which people draw on three different types of resources (what he terms economic, cultural, and social capital) to compete for status (what he terms “symbolic capital”). Distinct from economic capital (financial resources) and social capital (relationships, organizational affiliations, networks), cultural capital consists of a set of socially rare and distinctive tastes, skills, knowledge, and practices. Cultural capital entails what Gouldner (1979) has called a “culture of critical discourse”: a set of decontextualized understandings, developed through a reflexive, problematizing, expansionist orientation to meaning in the world, that are readily recontextualized across new settings (as opposed to knowledge of specific facts; see Hannerz 1990). Cultural capital exists in three primary forms: embodied as implicit practical knowledges, skills, and dispositions; objectified in cultural objects; and institutionalized in official degrees and diplomas that certify the existence of the embodied form. Cultural capital is fostered in an overdetermined manner in the social milieu of cultural elites: upbringing in families with well-educated parents whose occupations require cultural skills, interaction with peers from similar families, high levels of formal education at institutions that attract other cultural elites studying areas that emphasize critical abstract thinking and communication over the acquisition of particularized trade skills and knowledges, and then refinement and reinforcement in occupations that emphasize symbolic production. These innumerable, diverse, yet redundant, experiences particular to cultural elites become subjectively embodied as ways of feeling, thinking, and acting through the generative social psychological structure that Bourdieu terms the “habitus.” The habitus is an abstracted, transposable system of schema that both classifies the world
and structures action. Bourdieu emphasizes that the contents of the habitus are largely presuppositional rather than discursive and that the habitus structures actions through a process of creative typification to particular situations. In its subjective embodied form, cultural capital is a key element of the habitus.

Like other capital resources, cultural capital exists only as it is articulated in particular institutional domains. According to Bourdieu (as well as many other theorists of modernity), the social world consists of many distinctive, relatively autonomous, but similarly structured (i.e., “homologous”) fields such as politics, the arts, religion, education, and business. Fields are the key arenas in which actors compete for placement in the social hierarchy through acquisition of the statuses distinctive to the field. Thus, cultural capital takes on a distinctive form in each field: for example, in the academic field, cultural capital takes the form of intellectual brilliance, research competence, and detailed expertise that is embodied in presentations, teaching, and informal interactions, objectified in journal articles and books, and institutionalized in prestigious university degrees and society fellowships. In Distinction, Bourdieu documents how cultural capital is enacted in fields of consumption, not only the arts but also food, interior decor, clothing, popular culture, hobbies, and sport. Although cultural capital is articulated in all social fields as an important status resource, it operates in consumption fields through a particular conversion into tastes and consumption practices.

Unlike economic theories of markets in which people are conceived as strategic actors, in Bourdieu’s theory, resources that are valued in fields of consumption are naturalized and mystified in the habitus as tastes and consumption practices. The habitus organizes how one classifies the universe of consumption objects to which one is exposed, constructing desire toward consecrated objects and disgust toward objects that are not valued in the field. The manifestation of the structuring capabilities of the habitus as tastes and consumption practices across many categories of goods and activities results in the construction of a distinctive set of consumption patterns, a lifestyle (“manifested preferences”) that both expresses and serves to reproduce the habitus. Within the field of consumption, tastes and their expression as lifestyles are stratified on the basis of the objective social conditions that structure the habitus. Thus, the field of consumption is stratified so that there exist different lifestyles organized by class position. (To continue the academic field example, the same stratified patterns can be discerned in the desired qualities for faculty members at elite “research” schools, “balanced” schools, “teaching” schools, and community colleges.)

Isolating Cultural Capital, Tastes, and Consumption Fields.

Bourdieu argues that it is critical to distinguish between the different types of statuses that accrue in different fields: consumption is a partic-
ular status game that must be analyzed in isolation rather than lumped together with work, religion, education, and politics as Warner does. In addition, compared with Warner’s conflation of the different bases of social class, a key contribution of Bourdieu’s theory is that it effectively disaggregates the key dimensions of taste and explains their unique contribution to social reproduction. Economic capital is inscribed in consumption fields as tastes and consumption practices organized around the exchange value of consumption objects. Like Veblen’s pecuniary distinctions, consumption objects can symbolize differences in economic resources of the consumer. But, whereas economic capital is expressed through consuming goods and activities of material scarcity and inpted luxury, cultural capital is expressed through consuming via aesthetic and interactional styles that fit with cultural elite sensibilities and that are socially scarce.

**Taste as Practice.**

Warner and Bourdieu both argue that status is expressed and reproduced through implicit evaluations in everyday social interactions. However, for Warner, these interactions occur within heavily sedimented social networks and formal organizations such as leisure and service clubs and religious groups. This allowed him to assume, like Veblen, the Lynds, and Simmel before him, that elites evolve a distinctive constellation of consumption objects that express their status position. Public signaling of these consensus goods affirms one’s social position.

Significantly, Bourdieu offers a theory of social class consonant with social relations in advanced capitalist societies. Downplaying public displays of status symbols, Bourdieu emphasizes that status is continually reproduced as an unintended consequence of social interaction because all interactions necessarily are classifying practices; that is, micropolitical acts of status claiming in which individuals constantly negotiate their reputational positions (see also Collins 1981; Goffman 1967). Crucial to this process is the expression of cultural capital embodied in consumer actions. Rather than accruing distinction from pecuniary rarity or from elite consensus, Bourdieu argues that cultural capital secures the respect of others through the consumption of objects that are ideationally difficult and so can only be consumed by those few who have acquired the ability to do so. To take an example that Bourdieu might use were he to study the contemporary United States, when someone details Milos Forman’s directorial prowess in *The People vs. Larry Flynt* to a friend over dinner (or, conversely, offers a damning harangue of Forman as an unrepentant proselytizer of the dominant gender ideology), this discussion not only recreates the experiential delight that the movie provided but also serves as a claim to particular resources (here, knowledge of directorial styles in movies and the ability to carefully analyze these characteristics) that act as reputational currency. Such actions are per-
ceived not as explicit class markers but as bases for whom one is attracted to and admires, whom one finds uninteresting or does not understand, or whom one finds unimpressive and so seeks to avoid. Thus, status boundaries are reproduced simply through expressing one’s tastes.

In addition to this embodied form, Bourdieu argues that cultural capital also becomes objectified in consumption objects. At first blush, this idea appears to parallel the object signification approach since consumption objects serve as signals of status in both. However, with objectified cultural capital, the stratificatory power of cultural objects results not from group consensus or economic scarcity but from the inferred cultural aptitude of the consumers of the object. In other words, cultural objects such as the high arts that require significant cultural capital to understand and appreciate properly imply that their consumers apply distinctive practices and so serve as surrogate representations of these practices. A foundational premise of Bourdieu’s theory, then, is that categories of cultural goods and activities vary in the level of cultural capital required to consume them successfully (i.e., to fully enjoy the act of consuming).