ACCOUNTING FOR TASTES: SOME PROBLEMS IN BOURDIEU'S SOCIOLOGY OF CULTURE

Taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier. Social subjects, classified by their classifications, distinguish themselves by the distinctions they make, between the beautiful and the ugly, the distinguished and the vulgar, in which their position in the objective classifications is expressed or betrayed.¹

Pierre Bourdieu's *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* completes what is perhaps the strongest case we have about the social functions of cultural artefacts; but it is a case that is deeply flawed. In this article I try to isolate some of the theoretical presuppositions and implications of its central concepts, and to clarify their political limitations.

The subtitle of Bourdieu's first book in the area of cultural practice, *Un Art moyen: essai sur les usages sociaux de la photographie*, indicates how his interest is focused: he and his collaborators are concerned not with an aesthetics of photography (although, paradoxically, something like this emerges in the book) but with the social uses it is put to; specifically, they analyse the normative structures of aesthetic legitimacy in relation to which photographic practices are structured, and the way this relation then produces different conceptions of what photography is or should be – different sets of aesthetic standards – among different classes of practitioners. In a subsequent book, *L'Amour de l'art: les musées d'art européens et leur public*, Bourdieu and Darbel reject the assumption that there is a universal and undifferentiated public of the state-run art galleries – that 'everyone' goes – in order to conduct a statistical analysis of who precisely does visit them. What they found was that their public is differentiated along class lines or, more precisely (the difference is important), in terms of levels of education and in terms of cultural aspiration rather than achieved position. The statistics are stark: most working-class people don't go to art galleries, especially when difficult modern art is being exhibited; when they do go they stay for less time than middle-class and upper-class people (an average stay of 22, 35 and 47 minutes respectively); and the *musée d'art* reminds them of a church rather than of a library or a store. Experiencing a mixture of hostility and deference, working-class people choose to reject

the alienating institutions of legitimate culture, and this means that access to cultural goods 'is the privilege of the cultivated class; but this privilege has all the trappings of legitimacy. In effect, the only ones excluded are those who exclude themselves.'²

In *Distinction*, which draws in part on the earlier work, Bourdieu has produced a book with the 'perhaps immoderate ambition of giving a scientific answer to the old questions of Kant's critique of judgement, by seeking in the structure of the social classes the basis of the systems of classification which structure perception of the social world and designate the objects of aesthetic enjoyment' (p. xiv). Using extensive survey material administered over a number of years, Bourdieu sets aesthetic practice in relation to a range of other practices of 'taste', in order to reconstruct the systematic unity of class 'lifestyles', which in turn are generated by that system of 'durable dispositions' he calls the *habitus*. Thus, in addition to being asked about their preferences in painting, music and photographic themes, the interview subjects were questioned about choices in interior decoration, clothing, food and politics; and additional evidence is adduced concerning the social differentiation of the body and of language use.³ In the course of this investigation the book amasses a wealth of material about the distribution of tastes within the system of French culture.

The point of this is not to establish the truism that different classes adopt different lifestyles, but to explore the process by which differences in cultural preference become socially functional. It is a question not of differences in themselves but of the ability of the dominant class to impose the value given to these differences: to impose a recognition of the distinction between 'good' taste and 'vulgar' taste, between legitimate and illegitimate styles. Aesthetic judgements, then, do not obey an autonomous aesthetic logic; they transpose distinctions of class into distinctions of taste, and thereby strengthen the boundaries between classes. But they also assert the right of a ruling class to legitimate domination over other classes. Bourdieu argues this through an economic metaphor that he takes from Bernstein: competence in cultural codes constitutes a 'cultural capital' which is unequally distributed among social classes (although it has the appearance of an innate talent, a 'natural gift'). When invested in the exercise of taste, cultural capital yields both 'a profit in distinction, proportionate to the rarity of the means required to appropriate [cultural products], and a profit in legitimacy, the profit par excellence, which consists in the fact of feeling justified in being (what one is), being what it is right to be' (p. 228).

Cultural capital is generated in the schooling system, and Bourdieu here draws on his extensive work in the sociology of education. Very briefly, the relevant part of his argument is that cultural practices and preferences are linked in a two-step process to educational level and social origin, where the latter both reinforces and is discontinuous with the former. The function of the schooling system is to naturalize the streamings imposed by the social system, and in particular to valorize the systemic indeterminacy, the moments of exception, which disprove the rule of streaming. The

statistical reproduction of the class structure thereby becomes perceived as a question of individual merit. What the schooling system works to reproduce, therefore, is not 'culture' in the sense of a cultural capital that belongs to the 'whole of society', but rather the structure of distribution of this cultural capital (and in the long run the social structure itself).⁴ This process is complicated, however, by the ideological opposition played out within the ruling class between two modes of acquisition of culture: a scholastic mode, correlated with educational capital (and stigmatized for its visibility, its laboriousness); and a charismatic mode, correlated with inherited cultural capital.

At times Bourdieu takes the charismatic mode as characterizing all 'high' cultural practices; at other times he restricts it to the practices of the *dominant* fraction of the ruling class – the fraction that possesses economic capital (this is the first of a number of ambiguities concerning the putative unity of the ruling class). To the charismatic mode corresponds a mythology of the 'pure' gaze, of a naturally given taste: a mythology predicated on the forgetting of the process of acquiring cultural competence. This mythology

owes its plausibility and its efficacy to the fact that, like all the ideological strategies generated in the everyday class struggle, it *naturalizes* real differences, converting differences in the mode of acquisition of culture into differences of nature; it only recognizes as legitimate the relation to culture (or language) which least bears the visible marks of its genesis, which has nothing 'academic', 'scholastic', 'bookish', 'affected' or 'studied' about it, but manifests by its ease and naturalness that true culture is nature – a new mystery of immaculate conception. (p. 68)

By contrast, the specificity of the practices of the *dominated* fraction of the ruling class (the intelligentsia, which possesses only cultural capital) is never adequately defined. For Bourdieu it would presumably consist above all in the foregrounding and estrangement of formal structures – that is, in a certain willed clumsiness, an asceticism which renounces 'ease' and which valorizes symbolic over material appropriations of works of art. In both cases, however, legitimate culture is defined by its opposition to the 'vulgar' or 'common' – aesthetic epithets which carry a displaced class content.

Thus the principle of the pleasure involved in ('high') cultural practice 'lies, in the last analysis, in the denied experience of a social relationship of membership and exclusion' (p. 400). What Bourdieu now calls 'the aesthetic disposition', meaning by this the practices and preferences of the ruling class alone, is dependent upon a distance from need, a 'generalized capacity to neutralize ordinary urgencies and to bracket off practical ends' (p. 54), which links together the owners of economic and cultural capital (and which effectively blurs the difference between the two forms of capital). From here the argument proceeds in three stages. First, the aesthetic disposition is defined as conforming to the principles of a Kantian aesthetic which severs the work of art from worldly ends and practical

functions. Second, this aesthetic is then equated with an essential class experience: the aesthetic disposition 'presupposes the distance from the world . . . which is the basis of the bourgeois experience of the world' (p. 54). Finally, this correlation is then raised to a more general level: 'position in the classification struggle depends on position in the class structure' (p. 484); the one can be read off from the other.⁵

Two forms of essentialism operate in this argument. The first involves positing a single class 'experience' common to the sociologically quite distinct groups Bourdieu includes in the dominant class. The second posits a single aesthetic logic which corresponds to this experience. Together they suggest that there is an intrinsic logic of cultural practices which matches the intrinsic logic of a unitary ruling-class structure. And one of the effects of this is a binary construction of the concepts of a 'high' and a 'popular' aesthetic understood as something like class languages, fixed and ahistorical class dispositions with a necessary categorial structure.

Whereas the dominant aesthetic is associated with an autotelic formalism, a refusal of practical or ethical function, a refusal of the facile and the vulgar, and with intertextual rather than mimetic modes of reference, the 'popular' aesthetic is defined as having a primarily ethical basis and as subordinating artistic practice to socially regulated functions (for example, working-class people use photography above all for the ritual celebration of family unity).⁶ In a rejection of the Kantian prescriptions,

everything takes place as if the 'popular aesthetic' were based on the affirmation of continuity between art and life, which implies the subordination of form to function, or, one might say, on a refusal of the refusal which is the starting point of the high aesthetic, i.e. the clear-cut separation of ordinary dispositions from the specifically aesthetic disposition. (p. 32)

Thus working-class audiences are (the sense is: inherently) hostile to formal experimentation, and 'their reluctance or refusal springs not just from lack of familiarity but from a deep-rooted demand for participation, which formal experiment systematically disappoints' (pp. 32–3). It is worth noting that the *reasons* for this hostility are not given by Bourdieu's elaborate apparatus of sociological enquiry: he extrapolates them on the basis of a particular construction of working-class experience and of working people's 'deep-rooted demands'. Moreover, the aesthetic he proposes as characteristic of the working class is a conservative realist aesthetic. It could as well be defined in negative terms: as a refusal to consider the intertextual dimension of formal structures, and the social force of this intertextuality; as a lack of critical awareness of the codes through which reality effects are constructed. And, despite his denunciations of populism, Bourdieu sets up a very conventional opposition – as though of the authentic to the inauthentic – of popular culture to a 'mass market' culture (above all, television) in which 'dispossession of the very intention of determining one's own ends is combined with a more insidious

form of recognition of dispossession' (p. 386). The opposition confirms the essentialism by which the image of 'the people' is constructed.

If (like the concepts of elaborated and restricted code for Bernstein) the 'high' and the 'popular' aesthetics work primarily as class languages, they are also conceived in terms of differing orientations to the process of signification. This is expressed as a set towards either the 'form' or the 'content' of the message; and on to this primary opposition is grafted a loaded secondary opposition between the categories 'cold' and 'distant' on the one hand, and 'warm' and 'participatory' on the other. Thus the 'conspicuous formality' of the ruling-class ethos implies

a sort of censorship of the expressive content which explodes in the expressiveness of popular language, and by the same token, a distancing, inherent in the calculated coldness of all formal exploration, a refusal to communicate concealed at the heart of the communication itself, both in an art which takes back and refuses what it seems to deliver and in bourgeois politeness, whose impeccable formalism is a permanent warning against the temptation of familiarity. (p. 34)

Aesthetic distance – which Bourdieu equates with 'distance' from economic necessity – works 'by displacing the interest from the "content", characters, plot, etc., to the form, to the specifically artistic effects which are only appreciated relationally, through a comparison with other works which is incompatible with immersion in the singularity of the work immediately given' (p. 34). A double displacement, then: from the text as it is 'immediately given', and from the immediacy of life on to which the text would otherwise transparently open – since formal complexity 'throws the thing itself into the background and precludes direct communion with the beauty of the world' (p. 43).

The phrasing perhaps indicates that we should take a little readerly distance at this point: that Bourdieu, aware of the extent to which aesthetic arguments are always already inscribed in class positions, is here ironically adopting the language of the popular aesthetic itself. This is doubtless also true of a later sentence arguing that 'often the only escape from ambivalence or indeterminacy towards language is to fall back on what we *can* appreciate, the body rather than words, substance rather than form, an honest face rather than a smooth tongue' (p. 465). And yet whatever irony there is here doesn't modify the congruence of these sentences with Bourdieu's general line of argument. Having written with such force (above all in *Outline of a Theory of Practice*) against forms of essentialism and substantialism in social theory, Bourdieu falls effortlessly into both when it comes to the aesthetic. It should hardly be necessary to repeat the argument against the form/content dichotomy as Bourdieu employs it, but briefly it is this: that it places content outside the domain of the formal, and that it places the formal outside the domain of content. Coupled in this way, the categories are complicit in a naïve mimeticism rather than being capable of accounting for it.

Part of the problem is that Bourdieu is not interested in giving a detached

'account' of aesthetic codes. Despite the elaborate sociological apparatus and despite the commitment to a rigorously scientific relativism, his text is at this point almost explicitly interventionist, working to discount 'aesthetic' experience (understood as primarily an experience of form) and to valorize the directness of the working-class relation to the world. But the implicit supposition that one class stands in a more 'natural', less mediated relation to experience than do other classes is a romantic obfuscation. Bourdieu comes close to taking popular cultural forms as 'authentic' manifestations of working-class life, fully expressive of an autonomous class ethos – and this is made all the easier by the exclusion of 'mass' cultural forms from the definition of the popular. It is as though unified systems of class values were insulated from each other in completely distinct domains.

What gets overlooked here is the question of the relationality of cultural forms. Aesthetic choices are not made in a vacuum: they are made in negative relation to the other *kinds* of objects which could have been chosen, and this involves both the historical sequence to which an object belongs and its position within a synchronic system. To assert a preference (to take a book off the shelf, to tune into a radio station, to look at one picture rather than another) means using an unequally distributed cultural competence to evaluate a text in relation to these interlocking systems of relations. Now, Bourdieu's survey material, and the charts he constructs on the basis of it, do in fact set up rough models of these formations of value (formations which are, as I shall argue, only partly superimposable on social classes). Thus the survey questions on popular singers and on 'classical' music are made to yield various kinds of systemic ranking on a scale of legitimacy and difficulty: across the field, a ranking going from Georges Guétary, Petula Clark, Georges Brassens and Léo Ferré, to 'The Blue Danube', 'The Sabre Dance', *The Well-Tempered Clavier* and the 'Concerto for Left Hand'; and within classical music a class-correlated ranking going from *The Well-Tempered Clavier* to the *Rhapsody in Blue* to 'The Blue Danube' (pp. 19–20). But, while recognizing that choices made by the *dominant* class are fully relational, Bourdieu is much more ambivalent about how choices are made within the 'popular' aesthetic. This ambivalence centres on the question of the distribution of cultural competences.

A similar argument is made in both *L'Amour de l'art* and *Distinction*. It supposes that 'a work of art has meaning and interest only for someone who possesses the cultural competence, that is, the code, into which it is encoded'. This competence is crucial for the construction of textual significance: the beholder or listener or reader 'cannot move from the "primary stratum of the meaning we can grasp on the basis of our ordinary experience" to the "stratum of secondary meanings", i.e. the "level of the meaning of what is signified", unless he possesses the concepts which go beyond the sensible properties and which identify the specifically stylistic properties of the work' (pp. 2–3; the phrases quoted are from Panofsky). But one of the effects of the unequal distribution of competences by the

schooling system is that members of the dominated classes do tend not to have mastery over the 'specifically aesthetic' codes, and tend to substitute for them a set of borrowed non-aesthetic categories: 'When faced with legitimate works of art, people most lacking the specific competence apply to them the perceptual schemes of their own ethos, the very ones which structure their everyday perception of everyday existence' (p. 44). Ethical and practical judgements are brought to bear on works of art understood as the more or less realistic and unmediated expression of a content.

The earlier form of the argument, in *L'Amour de l'art*, opposes this way of treating the work of art, 'as a simple means of communication transmitting a transcendent meaning [*signification*]', to a properly aesthetic reception, which, rather than detaching the text from any context, relates it to the context of other works of art.⁷ The 'popular' aesthetic would thus be not a *different* set of aesthetic codes, but a way of using codes of everyday judgement rather than codes of aesthetic judgement in the appropriation of works of art. And the earlier book suggests that this entails important disadvantages for those deprived of aesthetic competence:

An understanding of the 'expressive' and, if I may use the word, 'physiognomic' qualities of the work is an inferior form of the aesthetic experience because, unable to be sustained, controlled, and corrected by a properly iconological knowledge, it uses a key [*chiffre*] which is neither adequate nor specific.⁸

The concept of 'deprivation' is itself unsatisfactory because it accepts as given the norms of high culture. Cultural disadvantage is, in fact, operative only *on the ground of high culture*. Bourdieu assumes that the legitimacy of this ground is still imposed on the dominated classes; but it may well be the case, particularly since the massive growth of a television culture in which working-class people tend to be fully competent, that it has become largely irrelevant. (Bourdieu never seeks to *establish* the case for the legitimacy of high culture; he simply assumes it – and he pays little attention to television.) On the other hand, however, the theory of cultural disadvantage does work better, in the framework set by Bourdieu's own account of cultural exclusion and distinction, than his later valorization of the popular aesthetic for its espousal of 'content' and of 'human' values. Again, the value of 'human content' is never explicitly argued for; it is presented only by a double negation, as when, noting that respondents with high levels of cultural capital reject images of a first communion, a sunset or a landscape as subjects likely to produce a 'beautiful' photograph, Bourdieu suggests that this rejection is motivated by the fact that the images are, 'in Ortega y Gasset's terms, "naïvely human"' (p. 35). Differing class judgements are described, that is to say, in terms of a differential relation to the photographic 'content', and this content is assumed to have a fixed meaning ('sunset' = 'human'). But of course this is not the case: meanings are not given in texts but are constructed in the relations between texts. The value of the image of a sunset cannot be read off from a photograph, but involves rather the *position* of this image within the system of similar

images – a system which possesses a certain statistical frequency and density, a certain sociocultural value. Having a specific competence in this case would mean being able to make an educated guess (literally) about the extent to which the image is culturally saturated and so informationally redundant, a guess about its place within a complex intertextual system.

In the same way, Bourdieu draws too simplistic a conclusion from the strategies of negation which characterize self-conscious artistic production. Thus he writes:

it is scarcely necessary to establish that the work of art is the objectification of a relationship of distinction and that it is thereby explicitly predisposed to bear such a relationship in the most varied contexts. As soon as art becomes self-conscious, in the work of Alberti, for example, as Gombrich demonstrates, it is defined by a negation, a refusal, a renunciation, which is the very basis of the refinement in which a distance is marked from the simple pleasure of the senses and the superficial seductions of gold and ornaments that ensnare the vulgar taste of the Philistines. (p. 227)

The implication is that this refusal is no more than the translation into the medium of painting of a gesture of snobbery. But this refusal is surely mediated by the function and value of 'sensual' painterly codes in the aesthetic domain, their overdetermination not as 'popular' codes (in the full and naturalizing sense Bourdieu gives the word – 'the simple pleasure of the senses') but as codes appropriated and automatized by an art market. Even were Bourdieu correct, however, in assigning a function of exclusion and distinction to artistic practices like those codified by Alberti, his argument would still be wrong because it would still be radically reductive. To write that the 'legitimate culture of class societies' is 'a product of domination predisposed to express or legitimate domination' (p. 228) is to assign a single and exclusive function to cultural practice, and to assume that the work of the text is exhausted in this function. Bourdieu is thereby quite unable to account for the possibility that 'legitimate' works of art might nevertheless be capable of exercising a critical function over and above their other functions.

It is the rigidity with which Bourdieu opposes two formally and functionally autonomous aesthetic universes that constitutes the problem. The immediate correlation of these aesthetic universes with social classes means that cultural forms are understood as non-contradictory expressive unities rather than as sites of political tension. Thus it becomes impossible to read, for example, a painting by Goya in terms of contradictions between its functions of cognition and exclusion, or indeed of its changing and potentially contradictory relation to the art market-place; and, conversely, the kind of political analysis that informs the work of, say, Stedman Jones on the music hall, or Willis on working-class counter-school culture, or Sennett and Cobb on the ethos of self-sacrifice in the American working class⁹ – work which stresses the ideological and political

ambiguity of popular cultural forms – is equally impossible in this account. I stress these *political* deficiencies because much of the recent reception of Bourdieu in English has accepted his account of the popular aesthetic in a quite uncritical manner.¹⁰

There is, however, a further theoretical problem in Bourdieu's work on culture which raises equally serious questions about the work's political consequences. This is the problem of how Bourdieu theorizes the relation between cultural capital and economic capital – or, to put it differently, the relation between the intelligentsia and the dominant class. Bourdieu defines class in terms of three variables: the volume of capital possessed; the composition of this capital (that is, the relation between economic and cultural capitals); and the change in volume and composition over time (the relation between past and potential trajectories). Within the dominant class 'the structure of the distribution of economic capital is symmetrical and opposite to that of cultural capital' (p. 120), and this means both that the two forms of capital are mutually exclusive, and that – in so far as possession of either is a sufficient criterion for classification in the dominant class – they are in some way mutually convertible. Their structural difference is subordinated to their potential equivalence. But of course this argument is incomplete: in the first place because the conversion of capitals can take place only under certain conditions and at certain restricted levels of the market, and in the second place because conversion is not reciprocal (it is possible to convert cultural capital into economic capital, but not vice versa). In the last instance symbolic and real capital are not equivalent, and this leaves open the question of the class location of intellectuals.

Now, Bourdieu posits that possessors of economic and cultural capital constitute two asymmetrical (dominant/dominated) fractions of the 'same' class. It is difficult, however – given that class is not defined in terms of *functional* identity – to know what establishes this sameness other than the assumed equivalence of the two forms of capital. Its effect is to bring about a systematically misleading conflation of the intelligentsia and its culture with the bourgeoisie and its culture – a conflation which is entirely the consequence of the initial methodological decision. Consider, for example, the histogram represented in figure 1. The class fractions are ranked in each case by educational capital, and this ranking establishes reasonably neat correlations between educational capital and musical preferences. If we rank the fractions by *economic* capital, however – with 'professions', 'secondary teachers', and 'higher-education teachers [and] art producers' slotted after 'cultural intermediaries [and] art craftsmen', and with 'industrial and commercial employers' moved to the top of the scale – the profiles look far less regular, as shown in figure 2. The sleight of hand by which the first histogram is organized – the substitution of an educational for an economic hierarchy – conceals the fact that, because of the specialized relationship of the intelligentsia to culture, there can be no immediate correlation of taste with class structure.

What Bourdieu does, in fact, is stress both the ideological incompatibility

Figure 1. Distribution of preferences for three musical works by class fraction, ranked by educational capital

Source: Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. R. Nice (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1984), p. 17.

Figure 2. Distribution of preferences of class fractions, ranked by economic capital

and the underlying class unity of the intelligentsia and the bourgeoisie. Thus he writes:

Through the mediation of the means of appropriation available to them, exclusively or principally cultural on the one hand, mainly economic on the other, and the different forms of relation to works of art which result from them, the different fractions of the dominant class are oriented towards cultural practices so different in their style and object and sometimes so antagonistic (those of 'artists' and 'bourgeois') that it is easy to forget that they are variants of the same fundamental relationship to necessity and to those who remain subject to it, and that each pursues the exclusive appropriation of legitimate cultural goods and the associated symbolic profits. (p. 176)

But again this is a sleight of hand, since the 'fundamental relationship to necessity' is structurally different in each case. On the one hand there is an investment of economic capital, a control over the means of production, and an extraction of surplus value from a workforce; on the other hand there is a position of wage labour or self-employment, and a delegated function of control. The conflation of these quite different positions in the relations of production indicates that something like an abstract concept of 'privilege' has been substituted for any more rigorous conception of class.

It is on the basis of the assumed unity of these two groups, however, that Bourdieu can then differentiate their systems of aesthetic preference. Whereas

the dominant fractions of the dominant class (the 'bourgeoisie') demand of art a high degree of denial of the social world and incline towards a hedonistic aesthetic of ease and facility, symbolized by boulevard theatre or Impressionist painting, the dominated fractions (the 'intellectuals' and 'artists') have affinities with the ascetic aspect of aesthetics and are inclined to support all artistic revolutions conducted in the name of purity and purification, refusal of ostentation and the bourgeois taste for ornament; and the dispositions towards the social world which they owe to their status as poor relations incline them to welcome a pessimistic representation of the social world. (p. 176)

The more differentiated it becomes, the more this analysis comes to emphasize the antagonism 'between the life-styles corresponding to the opposing poles of the field of the dominant class' (p. 283). And the more this is the case, the more it undermines the postulate of a unitary 'dominant aesthetic' corresponding to a unitary 'aesthetic disposition'.

In the same way, Bourdieu's unification at the level of capital-equivalence of a 'dominant class' leads him to neglect the potential for contradiction in the role of the intelligentsia. The coincidence between the voting patterns of intellectuals and the working class seems to him 'paradoxical' (p. 438), and contradictions in political ideology are read as a sign of bad faith – in this passage, for example:

The members of the intellectual occupations (teachers, researchers, artists) declare themselves, more often than all other categories, 'supporters of revolutionary action', opposed to 'authoritarianism' and in favour of 'international class solidarity'. . . . But their answers often betray an ethos at variance with their discourse: they say more often than manual workers that their 'confidence in the trade unions' has declined since May 1968 or that an individual's most important characteristic is his personality (manual workers more often cite class) or that 'economic progress has benefited the majority' (workers more often think it has only benefited a minority). It may be that the tendency to political hyper-coherence which leads intellectuals to treat every problem as political and to seek perfect coherence in all attitudes in all areas of life is imposed on them by the fundamental discrepancy between their ethos and their discourse, especially when they originate from the dominated fractions of the dominant class. (pp. 420–1)

The disparity between 'ethos' and 'discourse' is taken as an index of hypocrisy, and Bourdieu goes on to cite the 'nuances' of expression – evident only in the interview situation and too subtle to be reproduced in his text – which subvert the reality or the genuineness of these opinions. But the disparity could equally be read as a sign both of the possibility of contradiction within a class and within a class fraction (the intelligentsia has an unstable class location and is not itself unified), and of the power of cultural capital to motivate a partial break with the 'objective' determinants of class ethos and class condition. A different account of intellectuals – that of Poulantzas, for instance, who identifies the intelligentsia as a 'new petty bourgeoisie', or that of Wright, who stresses its contradictory class location¹¹ – would emphasize both the political ambivalence of the intelligentsia and the irreducibility of cultural capital to economic class.

The important point here is that, without a more complex analysis of the political and ideological functions of intellectuals, Bourdieu is unable to theorize relations of domination as relations of contested hegemony. Rather, he is forced to think in terms of a simple opposition between two discrete class and cultural formations. It is true that this rigid dichotomization is modified somewhat in later sections of the book: Bourdieu argues against the existence of an autonomous 'popular culture' and concludes that the urban working class 'remains fundamentally defined by the relation of dispossessed to possessor which links it to the bourgeoisie, in culture as in other areas' (p. 395); and he quotes Gramsci to support his argument that there are many features of the working-class lifestyle 'which, through the sense of incompetence, failure or cultural unworthiness, imply a form of recognition of the dominant values' (p. 386). But this dominance of the dominant values – which is never really given a historical and national specificity – then seems to become something absolute, and the working class to be inevitably and inexorably entrapped within the cultural limits imposed on it. Thus Bourdieu contends that 'the dominated, whose interests are bound up with the raising of consciousness, that is, with

language, are at the mercy of the discourses that are presented to them; whenever they emerge from doxa they are liable to fall into allodoxia, into all the false recognitions encouraged by the dominant discourse' (p. 461); and even political insight is insufficient to break the hold of these false recognitions, since 'the most politically conscious fraction of the working class remains profoundly subject, in culture and language, to the dominant norms and values, and therefore deeply sensitive to the effects of authority imposition which every holder of cultural authority can exert' (p. 396). The totalizing grip of the 'dominant norms', understood as a unitary set of values, allows for no possibility of critique and social transformation.

Which makes it all the harder to understand what constitutes the possibility of Bourdieu's own critical exteriority to the dominant norms. Certainly it is not a *political* positioning which would inscribe its own class interest in the analysis, since Bourdieu detaches his categories from the political process. Nor is it given in the disrupted and ambivalent situation of the intelligentsia. One can only conclude that it is a purely philosophical, that is a purely *disciplinary*, authority that enables Bourdieu's work to stand outside and above the game of intellectual competition, outside the political imaginary, outside the categories of a dominant and all-embracing culture. Thus, writing of the specular dialectic of boulevard and avant-garde theatre, Bourdieu remarks that 'the whole process constitutes a perfect circle from which the only escape is to objectify it sociologically' (p. 235). It is the regime of truth ordering the discipline of *sociology* that yields the single point of exception to the 'labour of domination' (p. 511) performed by all (other) intellectual work, and that allows Bourdieu to make the triumphal claim that his book has 'produced the truth of the taste against which, by an immense repression, the whole of legitimate aesthetics has been constructed' (p. 485). Written from an *impossible* perspective, a point that transcends the social space, *Distinction* ends up like the king in medieval social taxonomy, 'who, by setting himself up as the absolute subject of the classifying operation, as a principle external and superior to the classes it generated (unlike the three orders, who were subjects but also objects, judges but also parties), assigned each group its place in the social order, and established himself as an unassailable vantage-point' (p. 477).

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Notes

- 1 Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (1979), trans. R. Nice (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1984), p. 6. Further references to this will appear in the text as page numbers in parentheses.
- 2 Pierre Bourdieu and Alain Darbel, *L'Amour de l'art: les musées d'art européens et leur public*, 2nd rev. edn (Paris: Minuit, 1969), p. 69.
- 3 The sociology of language is treated at greater length in Pierre Bourdieu, *Ce*

- que parler veut dire: l'économie des échanges linguistiques* (Paris: Fayard, 1981).
- 4 Pierre Bourdieu and J.-C. Passeron, *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture* (1970), trans. R. Nice (London: Sage, 1977), p. 25.
 - 5 There is a more mediated version of this model in Bourdieu's frequent practice of reading texts as expressive of the dispositions of authors and then reducing authors to the class positions they represent; for example, 'Differences between works are predisposed to express differences between authors, partly because, in both style and content, they bear the mark of their authors' socially constructed dispositions (that is, their social origins, retranslated as a function of the positions in the field of production which these dispositions played a large part in determining)' (p. 20). More generally, Bourdieu tends to reduce all intellectual practice to the figures of intellectuals and the play of their career interests in a closed intellectual market. He thereby minimizes both the overdetermination of this market by other social forces, and the *ideological* positions – the truth-values – that intellectuals put in play. See Pierre Bourdieu, 'Intellectual field and creative project', in M. Young (ed.), *Knowledge and Control: New Directions for the Sociology of Education* (London: Collier Macmillan, 1971), pp. 161–88; 'Les fractions de la classe dominante et les modes d'appropriation des œuvres d'art', *Information sur les sciences sociales*, 13, 3 (1974); 'The specificity of the scientific field and the social conditions of the progress of reason', *Social Science Information*, 14, 4 (1975), pp. 19–47; and David Turnbull, 'Pierre Bourdieu and the Blainey debate', *Arena*, 74 (1986), pp. 133–7.
 - 6 Pierre Bourdieu, L. Boltanski, R. Castel and J.-D. Chamboredon, *Un Art moyen: essai sur les usages sociaux de la photographie* (Paris: Minuit, 1965), pp. 25, 48.
 - 7 Bourdieu and Darbel, op. cit., p. 73.
 - 8 Ibid., p. 81.
 - 9 See Gareth Stedman Jones, *Languages of Class: Studies in English Working Class History, 1832–1982* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); Paul Willis, *Learning to Labour: How Working Class Kids Get Working Class Jobs* (Farnborough: Saxon House, 1977); Richard Sennett and Jonathan Cobb, *The Hidden Injuries of Class*, 2nd edn (New York: Vintage, 1973).
 - 10 See, for example, Nicholas Garnham and Raymond Williams, 'Pierre Bourdieu and the sociology of culture', *Media, Culture and Society*, 23, 3 (1980), pp. 209–23.
 - 11 Nicos Poulantzas, *Political Power and Social Classes* (1968), trans. T. O'Hagan (London: New Left Books/Sheed & Ward, 1973); Erik Olin Wright, 'Intellectuals and the class structure of capitalist society', in Pat Walker (ed.), *Between Labour and Capital* (Boston, Mass.: South End Press, 1979).

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