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Does Taste Still Serve Power? The Fate of Distinction in Britain

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by Alan Warde

Introduction: Matters of Taste

In the work of Pierre Bourdieu the possession of good taste is a weapon. Taste is constituted through judgments concerning the aesthetic qualities of particular items and activities. Much judgment is tacit, recorded in and expressed through people's possessions, learning experiences, comportment and accumulated cultural competence. For Bourdieu it can only be learned from particular positions within the social field. Aesthetic preferences are therefore an indicator or marker of position.

Good taste is that which is legitimised, or "consecrated," in a given societal milieu. The consecration process is contested always, but it tends to follow patterns of ascendancy in wider social and political struggles. Dominant groups are served by their tastes being consecrated as good taste. The hallmarks of good taste may then be presented – or typically *were* during most of the Twentieth century – as universally and objectively superior in quality. Bourdieu unmasks this pretence. Good taste is determined in the course of social struggle; the content is arbitrary.

The Bourdieusian argument is that "judgment of taste," the judgment of judgments in other words, results in insidious and invidious modes of social classification. In practice, good taste functions as a weapon legitimising domination. In *Distinction* the mode of appropriation of cultural items (with its corollary, a stance of disinterestedness as a mark of the dominance) is at least as important in indicating cultural hierarchy as expressed or observed attachments to particular items (the liking for chamber music, say) which constitute holdings of cultural capital. *Distinction* is explicitly about the social functions of good and bad taste – the reason why

Bourdieu talks of "the social critique of the judgment of taste." If taste requires judgment (though that judgment may be tacit), then we are looking at the process by which "taste classifies and classifies the classifier." Differential shared tastes are ways of creating within-class senses of belonging and solidarity and between-class senses of distinction. This is at the core of Bourdieu's contribution. Taste plays a role in social classification, in symbolic struggle and in class formation. Taste is a weapon for drawing social distinctions and for exercising social and symbolic domination.[1]

Bourdieu's achievement was to establish an autonomous role for cultural phenomena in class domination in a period when sociology placed great emphasis on material life. Economistic theories, which rendered culture super-structural, asserted that ownership of economic capital and economic resources was the basis of, and almost entirely accounted for, the distribution of power. Cultural differences mattered for Bourdieu because their objectivated characteristics can be taken as indicators of social worth. Social classification of self and others produces differential esteem and treatment. Expression and justification of social superiority and subordination are made possible. As a consequence, opportunities, rewards and favours are allocated unequally. Taste is one manifestation of a person's holdings of *cultural capital* which can be accumulated and converted into other kinds of capital – economic, social and symbolic [Bourdieu 1986]. For Bourdieu, these were postulates of a general theory of power, class and taste which he anticipated would be applicable widely across modern societies.

Despite much criticism, Bourdieu's account remains a benchmark for analysis of the role of cultural practice in the exercise and maintenance of power because, arguably, no better alternative theoretical framework has replaced it. Almost every element of his position has been subject to challenge. A few maintain that class has all but disappeared. Others think that hierarchical cultural boundaries have dissolved. Some think that the relationship between social and cultural hierarchies has altered. Others proceed as if Bourdieu's account was fundamentally adequate and fit for purpose. These are usually presented as alternative substantive and theoretical diagnoses of the present. The main focus of the extensive ensuing debate has been on cultural

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[1] Teil and Hennion [2004] distinguish five distinct notions of this "polymorphic" concept which different disciplines and approaches emphasize:
    a) an expression of biological need;
    b) social differentiation of attraction towards things;
    c) a relationship of perception of a product by a subject;
    d) reflective judgment ("the emergence of reflexivity");
    e) the practice of perception.
For Bourdieu, and thus in this paper, taste is a composite of the second and the fourth.

change rather than the relationship between power and taste. In this paper I consider some evidence for these propositions in respect of Britain at the beginning of the Twenty-first century with a view to showing that they are not necessarily exclusive alternatives.[2]

In an important and neglected paper Holbrook *et al.* [2002] demonstrate that there is no mutual incompatibility between three effects or tendencies which are often considered alternatives in contemporary debates – boundary effacement, omnivorousness, and distinction. These effects are expressed summarily as follows. First, "some things are liked and disliked by everybody;" or, people of different social classes like some of the same things [Halle 1993]. Second, "some people like everything," with people of higher social class tending to like more items and genres than those of lower status. This, the omnivore thesis [Peterson and Kern 1996],[3] sees advantage to be gained from an openness to diversity which results in the pursuit of variety. Third, "different people from different backgrounds like different things to different degrees;" or, people of higher classes use their cultural habits to mark their standing *vis-à-vis* lower classes [Bourdieu 1984], typically having predictable likings for items which have in the past been associated with "high" culture. Holbrook *et al.* use a large quantity of market research data to show that effacement, omnivore and distinction effects operate simultaneously and recommend statistical procedures for disentangling each effect. I also find evidence of all three conditions, but seek to understand how they might relate to one another in an understanding of contemporary alignments of taste and power.

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[2] In so doing, my purpose is neither to praise nor to bury Bourdieu. This paper does not seek to adjudicate at this level. I consider that the debate has been devoted more to an exploration of shifts in culture than to the effect of taste on power and that this has led to an unbalanced re-appraisal of Bourdieu's theoretical propositions. Too often his position is simplified, even bowdlerised, in the search for a clear target against which to discuss empirical claims about socio-cultural change.

[3] See also Peterson [2005] for a comprehensive review of its current state.

Data: Cultural Consumption and Social Exclusion

This paper arises from a study which systematically explored cultural capital and taste.[4] It was the first systematic attempt to explore cultural domination in the British context using both quantitative and qualitative methodologies. A national random sample survey, with an achieved sample of 1564 respondents, explored cultural tastes, participation and knowledge and their association with economic and social capital.[5] Semi-structured household interviews[6] and focus-group discussions explored similar issues.

Here I draw primarily on the focus group interviews. 25 focus group discussions were conducted between March and July 2003. The 74 women and 69 men involved came from six areas across the UK, taking account of national, metropolitan and provincial, and urban and rural differences. They aimed to reflect the cultural diversity of Britain: different ethnic communities, gay and lesbian groups, groups of different ages (over 18), and of varying socio-economic position were represented (see Appendix 1 for the description of the focus group composition). The groups were recruited and moderated by trained academic staff, access being obtained through community groups, business and professional organisations, drawing on personal and professional networks. Topics of discussion ranged from leisure activities to perceptions of barriers to cultural participation, and included views about good and bad taste. Moderators were encouraged to adopt a psychodynamic rather than a prescriptive approach in order to avoid imposing hierarchies of value. The analysis involved several procedures. Moderators reported on group composition and dynamics of discussion, Audio-tape recordings of discussions were transcribed, employing Nudi*ist software.

[5] The survey was administered to a main sample of 1564 respondents. Data was collected between November 2003 and March 2004 by the National Centre for Social Research. See Thomson [2004] for the technical report. For early results see *Cultural Trends* [2006].

[6] 44 individual in-depth interviews were conducted with 30 individuals who had been respondents in the survey, and 14 of their partners, during the later months of 2004. See Silva [2005] for details.

Transcriptions were indexed according to occupational classification and themes of discussion. Each group was analysed briefly by the research team. Subsequently a more detailed analysis of particular themes has been conducted, including this one on taste and class. Silva and Wright [2005] reflect critically on the methodological aspects of holding focus groups on a sensitive matter of values.

The present analysis of class and taste concentrates on passages from the transcripts which dealt with issues of standards of judgment, good and bad taste, and the relationship between social position and taste. Moderators were instructed, if possible in the light of the flow of the discussion, to inquire what groups members thought were in good and bad taste. Most did introduce the topic at the end, since it usually did not arise spontaneously. Moderators were also requested not to suggest that cultural items were hierarchically ordered, nor to address the question of class directly. Various views of the nature of cultural order were forthcoming. Groups rarely introduced class into the discussion of their own accord, but when they did it seemed significant. All talked about social and cultural classification, though often only indirectly in relation to cultural hierarchy and class. Analysis proceeds with reference to the class composition of the focus groups, though not all groups were class homogeneous and certainly they should not be interpreted as typical of all members of social classes in Britain.

The next section describes some of the key themes emerging in the focus groups. Passing reference is made to opinion questions in the survey regarding the societal consequences of the objectification of taste. In order to critically evaluate the Bourdieusian account of cultural consumption with reference to the UK I provide evidence about: what people say about taste; whether there is a hierarchy of tastes; what they claim to be in good or bad taste; whether such judgments reflect a view of social hierarchy; and whether that hierarchy was associated with, or understood in terms of class. In section 4 the implications are drawn out for debates about aestheticisation, standards, class, and legitimate culture. The conclusion extrapolates from the evidence to some general theoretical issues surrounding cultural capital. In particular, it returns to the claims of Holbrook *et al.* [2002] about the co-existence of boundary effacement, omnivorousness and distinction.

Taste, Standards, Class and Domination: Some Evidence

Given the close intertwining of resources, rank and taste, and the well publicized impression that matters of culture are in flux, it might be anticipated that popular understandings would be complicated. This is indeed the case, there being little

consensus in Britain on what taste is, where it comes from, how it can be judged, and with what social consequence.

The Mechanics of Taste

That taste is individual and personal is probably the most prevalent understanding across the focus groups, though it appears in several guises. For example, it was said in a group of rural service workers discussing what they understood by taste, "Everybody's different" (FG1) and "it depends on the individual person" (FG1).[7] Someone in a group of supervisory workers said, "It's whatever you feel comfortable with" (FG12). In a group of the retired middle class there was no dissent to the observation that "what is one person's good taste is another person's bad taste" (FG3). It was added, "good taste is something you like which pleases you, and bad taste is something which offends" (FG3). Taste is in these accounts an individual matter, a matter of personal judgment, although in the last there is a hint of its standing in relation to some moral standards regarding offensiveness. The same group, reflecting further, said "it [good taste] is the sort of thing you like to think you've got yourself. On the other hand it is arrogant really" (FG3). This apparently acknowledges that taste is a valued property, one which others may recognize, but that it may be problematic to pride oneself on its possession. By contrast, Laura, a member of an African-Caribbean middle class group said:

> I think there are still benchmarks, and I think that we do actually, deep down still think that there's good taste and there's bad taste. We may not be honest about it (FG6).

Taste is then sometimes an attribute of an item, sometimes a procedure of judging, sometimes something one possesses (whether innate or a cultivated capacity to judge), and sometimes an objective and external standard. Nevertheless, most often it is considered a matter of personal preference.

This range of definitions indicates that, in the context of discussion around taste, many lay people recognise its social reference. In fact, groups were able to rehearse arguments very similar to those in the social science literature. In the course of one group discussion (FG2), contrasts were drawn between the individual and society, subjective and objective standards, division and difference, and personal preference and the judgment of other people. While there may be, in Bourdieu's [2000] terms,

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[7] See Appendix 1 for the composition of each focus group which is given a number in the text. All names of focus group participants have been anonymised (they were asked to choose their own pseudonym).

a difference between practical and scholastic reason, many groups proved capable of discussing the questions that exercise sociologists in similar terms. The economists' view that taste is individual, voluntary and subjective was contrasted with a sociological account founded on social pressure, manipulation and upbringing. "Society decides what is good and bad, whatever the connotation of the word good and bad are," said one man (FG2).

More sophisticated versions of what amount to scholastically informed practical reason were apparent in the black middle class group which explicitly recognized that social position had an effect on views about taste. Thus Laura, an African-Caribbean lawyer, said:

> I think a lot is to do with your upbringing and um your schooling, your peers as you say. I mean I think that I've learnt a lot in terms of um different social class values and standards because of the educational experience that I've had (FG6).

A group of self-employed small business owners distinguished between appreciating good design and liking it. Others debated the relationship between taste and fashion. For example, one participant in a group of women professionals proposed that "it's got to be down to individual taste" while another maintained that "a lot goes on fashion, and it's what is dictated as good and what is bad" (FG23).

Cultural Boundaries and Standards of Taste

In situations where a well-defined hierarchically-ordered system of classification of cultural forms exists, one would expect that people might acknowledge and accede to expert judgment, conceding that some had more acceptable tastes than others. Uncertainty about who, if anyone, is justified in pronouncing on good taste was revealed in answers to the survey (see Table 1). However, well over half of the population, 57 per cent, agreed with the statement that "One person's taste is as good as the next." Almost three quarters of the sample agreed with the proposition that "It seems that anything can count as art these days." While less than two fifths could assent to the statement "There are definite standards for deciding whether music is good or bad." So when Bob (FG3) expostulated "discernment of good, bad and indifferent, I don't think anybody knows these days," he was reiterating a majority view. Significant disagreement about standards of judgment means that the majority find no objective means to evaluate cultural products.

TAB. 1. *Opinions about cultural taste. Percentages*

"One person's taste is as good as the next"

strongly agree	agree	neither	disagree	strongly disagree	don't know	%	N
10	47	13	26	4	1	101	1564

"It seems that anything can count as art these days"

strongly agree	agree	neither	disagree	strongly disagree	don't know	%	N
19	54	12	13	1	1	100	1564

"There are definite standards for deciding whether music is good or bad"

strongly agree	agree	neither	disagree	strongly disagree	don't know	%	N
3	36	22	35	2	1	99	1564

"The old snobbery once associated with cultural taste has now all but disappeared"

strongly agree	agree	neither	disagree	strongly disagree	don't know	%	N
1	26	23	45	4	2	101	1564

Reasons for the lack of consensus about whether there are definable cultural standards were revealed in discussion. A group of students and young professionals (FG13), while believing that tastes are contestable and might be expected to generate disagreement, were nevertheless prepared to make judgments of a quasi-objective kind. Boy bands are deemed bad, partly because they are commercial. But this is not cause for dismay: "I probably see them as bad taste but not really worth worrying about," for "you know they're gonna pass." This relaxed generational take on the nature of judgment is distinctive, though it perhaps implies a providential view that it is the bad that will prove ephemeral.

Some groups, younger and better educated, felt able to say that they like things of questionable quality. Joanna said "I revel in my bad taste now, whereas before I pretended I didn't have it" (FG13); and Jenny (FG13) noted "there are some things

that I like that I'm aware aren't in particularly good taste, like EastEnders" which, she continued, she previously wouldn't have admitted to liking. Note that this is to affirm that some things *are* in bad or poor taste. It was the educated who recognized changes in their own stances. So Amy (FG5) said that in relation to her mother's habit of watching Coronation Street,[8] "I used to be really snobby." Of going to university and to live in London she said:

> It has all changed my own taste (...) I'm quite middle class actually you know. I'm like from a working class background but you know I go to university, I listen to Radio 4, I like classical music and jazz blah, blah, blah, you know I do karaoke as well but (...) when I'm myself my tastes are tastes of my family or tastes I was brought up with. I don't feel snobby about other people's choices about that (FG5).

Other groups became animated while trying to unravel quasi-philosophical knots. Unskilled manual workers complained that thinking about taste made their heads hurt. But the highly educated were just as likely to find it hard to arrive at a position about standards. We asked some groups directly what they thought good and bad taste was, and requested examples. Good taste was particularly hard to define, no one being able to offer any criteria other than personal preference to determine what was good. Good taste has few, if any, substantive characteristics. Examples emerged mostly as oppositions in descriptions of bad taste. For instance, Alessandro said:

> We're surrounded by ideas of what's good taste and what's bad taste. David Lean's good art, Coronation Street isn't. I'm still quite influenced by that, though since I've been "educated," done a degree, I try to question that in myself (FG21).

Alessandro seems to suggest that there is no ultimate arbiter of good taste. But he betrays a strong residual sense of there being some objective (i.e. agreed, though probably not rationally justifiable) basis for determining good taste. If one cannot deny that some things are better than others, there must be some, if concealed, grounds for attributing quality.

It proved easier to articulate the nature of bad than good taste. Bad taste is primarily defined in terms of moral harm, an idea emerging in more than a quarter of all groups. It was identified in bad jokes, an example mostly proffered by men (e.g. FG2, FG12); in urban vandalism (FG16); and in advertisements which cause embarrassment or contaminate children (FG9). Bad taste is considered a product of media more generally, and its hypocrisy (FG3). "Offensiveness" defines bad taste. In this respect it is asymmetrical with good taste. Good taste is personal (though it

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[8] Award winning British soap opera, situated in North West England, first screened in 1960 on ITV, and still one of the most widely viewed of British television programmes.

may involve some types of conformism), so one's own judgment is not to be insisted upon. Bad taste, by contrast, is harmful and, implicitly, would best be eliminated or controlled.

Examples of bad taste varied from group to group. There are comparatively few substantively identified items of aesthetic bad taste: "Mushes" (described as wearing "shell suits," "dodgy trainers," "15 years old with kids," "big gold chains round their necks," "massive earrings," "lots of gold," "bleached blond hair") and Gareth Gates[9] were pinpointed by the skilled Welsh working class (FG8); dying hair red by the gay men (FG2); Charlie's Angels[10] and Big Brother[11] by the professional cultural intermediaries (FG20); and Abba[12] and EastEnders[13] by young professionals (FG13). Examples of moral failings include bad behaviour on the TV, and especially advertisements, which corrupt children (FG9, FG4); bad etiquette, for instance "sucking the teeth" (FG6); sexual immorality (FG4, FG10); and sex and swearing on TV (FG4).

So, there is no unanimity as to whether there are standards or whether, instead, anything goes. Middle class groups are more likely to give examples of bad taste which are aesthetic, while working class groups tend to select moral bad taste. One exception was the middle class black group (discussed further below) who arguably were most aware of the social functions of culture. In general, the evidence supports Woodward and Emmison [2001] proposition that older and less well educated groups operate with social and collective criteria of taste, while younger people and those with higher education are more likely to make aesthetic and personal, rather than moral and collective, judgments.

Other participants embraced an omnivorous orientation [Peterson 2005]. Among the group of professional women, Beverley described liking a mix of high and low, classical literature and Big Brother, and specifically rejected any intimation of condescension:

> There's a place for extremes (...) Classic jazz to the cheesy pop, that is also part of my life, you know, I'm very well read but I will also sit down and watch some Big Brother or I'll also go surfing on the internet for some tacky gadget that I don't need (...) There's kind of a place for me for all of those things and I don't necessarily dismiss one thing just because it's a certain person that does it or it's a certain group

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[9] English pop singer who rose to fame after coming second in the competition in the first series, in 2002, of an ITV programme, "Pop Idol," where contestants sang cover versions of popular songs.

[10] Blockbuster American action/comedy/ adventure movie of 2000, and sequel 2003.

[11] Most notorious of reality TV shows, with very large viewing figures in the UK.

[12] Highly commercially successful Swedish pop music band, active 1972-82.

[13] Popular BBC soap opera, first broadcast in 1985 on BBC1, located in East London, with consistently high audience ratings ever since.

of people that are seen to be doing it (...) I wouldn't not try something just because (...) it's something that only, I don't know, people out of work do (FG23).

An implicit acknowledgement of a recognisable hierarchical coding of cultural items frames her claim that it is both possible and desirable to span the boundaries. Openness to diversity is valorised. However, Janine said in response, "I do feel guilty if I watch crap," and despite the moderator (!) intervening to say that there is no such thing as crap, Janine reiterated the point, because she believed that she, unlike some others, had a capacity to make something of good cultural things: "I feel so guilty, I feel terrible, what am I doing." Janine was adamant that there are objective standards. Most of the middle class groups contained some who shared her view, the most obvious exception being that of the business elites (FG24).

Three company directors in London comprised the business elite focus group. The moderator, who had conducted several others with middle class groups, captured the tone of the discussion in reporting:

> Unlike any of the other groups these three all expressed, in different ways, an un-abashed pleasure in popular culture – including reading "trash" crime, Hollywood wives novels, the *Sun*[14] newspaper, and watching EastEnders. Some of this was in the interests of knowing something about clients' cultural lives. (Inka said she read books on Islam for the same reason). But it was also pleasurable, fun, and a way of relaxing.

The moderator also noted that "similarly, I felt that this was the only group who genuinely believed their rhetoric about enjoyment being the only discriminator between cultural preferences. This seemed to be informed in part by an assessment that a lot of 'high culture' is simply elite culture (i.e. it belongs to an elite rather than that it is interesting, enjoyable, or complex)." Nevertheless, this group expressed tastes for items of legitimate culture also, including modern literature and theatre.

Another version of the omnivorous orientation appeared in the middle class Afro-Caribbean group. After a somewhat embarrassed discussion, involving the suggestion that Eric was somehow perverse in reading, and particularly in *admitting* to reading, the *News of the World* (a Sunday tabloid newspaper), Laura concluded, "I'm all for people doing what they want to do and saying that, you know, because there is still a lot of snobbery in circles that we move in." This sparked some further discussion of bad taste in which Simon professed the essence of the case for an emergent omnivorousness;

> But, there are things though that you're, like it's kind of cool to have bad taste (...) 'Coz you're kind of allowed to read, it's kind of cool to read *The News of the World*

[14] Large circulation British daily tabloid newspaper.

on a Sunday as well if you balance it out with something else. It's cool to kind of say I went to a crap film (...) [if also] I go to the opera or whatever (...) That's why I think kind of, issues, things have changed a little bit. I think things are a lot more accessible to people now.

Teri, however, followed on soon after with a version of an account of distinction.

I think high art exists because we're human beings and by nature we have the thing that we want to, you know, socialize within particular groups, and in order for those groups to be defined that we would disassociate ourselves from other people, so in order to do that we have to create something to make ourselves different.

Teri, in keeping with the tone of that group discussion, was critical of distinction. However, not everyone repudiates cultural hierarchy. One person, but one person only, admitted to being "elitist" in taste. Lee said:

I don't see a problem with dismissing something as crap (...) I still do think there's a snobbery arbiter up somewhere up there that tells you (FG22).

In response, however, in ensuing debate about whether things can be dismissed or not, and whether that is a collective or a personal decision, Miranda concluded:

There are so many messages about what's good and what's bad that unless you sit down and decide for yourself what you like then you're just gonna get confused.

To sum up, there is significant dissensus about standards. Boundaries between good and bad are blurred, but not erased. Although for many they are opaque and obscure, examples and discussion imply their existence. Indeed, the recognition of some boundaries is a precondition of the omnivore orientation which we have detected. Leaping the fences that once clearly separated legitimate from popular culture depends upon the recognition, if as much memory as imperative, of a cultural hierarchy. But we have only one instance of anyone making the case for the existence of an objectively superior elite culture.

Distinction, Snobbery, and Class

Having good or bad taste, or liking things coded good or bad, is in principle harmless. It is at the point where taste is taken as an indicator of personal, or social, standing that it becomes invidious. Snobbery is ascribed to people who imply their own superiority, and the inferiority of others, on the basis of differences in taste. One party takes a condescending attitude towards the other, and as likely as not the other feels resentment and hostility.

It would seem from the focus groups that snobbery is universally abhorred. It is implicit in a working class group (FG8) when it was ruefully and rather resentfully observed that "I think some people would look down on us lot." In the same group it was said, "There's a lot too much judging going on in the world." In addition, there was some hint that anyone who is or has been working class is more likely to talk about being or having been ashamed of their tastes (FG5). Notions of "Us" and "Them" were very much present in the world views of working class groups.

Condemnation of snobbery was explicit in several groups including gay men, the black middle class and managers. Evan said:

> I often worry they [colleagues] think I'm a snob and think (...) [the stuff they watch on TV and all the soaps] is beneath me and I'm not like that at all, I mean I'm just not interested in this big brother person or whatever (FG25, senior managers).

He insisted that he is not cleverer because of his tastes; it just means "I'm interested in something slightly different." German by birth, he followed up with a discussion of elitism and "class-riddled English society."

Anti-snobbery, or fear of being thought a snob, manifests itself as reluctance to judge the tastes of others. One gay man asserted "Are we ready to sit here and actually judge what other people's opinions are?" (FG2). People are very uncomfortable, very unwilling, to make judgments about others. This is perhaps why they fall back when accounting for their own tastes on what they themselves "like;" taste is a matter of personal preference. However, most groups also betrayed a sneaking suspicion that not all was contained therein. Interestingly, a survey question asked whether people agreed with the statement "The old snobbery once associated with cultural taste has now all but disappeared:" 49 per cent of our respondents disagreed (see Tab. 1, row 4). More people thought the "old snobbery" was still in evidence than thought it had disappeared. However, it was *not* the working class who were most persuaded of the persistence of snobbery.

If snobbery implies that people are looked down upon because of their tastes, then it impinges upon social justice. In Britain, snobbery has always carried overtones of class posturing. However, class was comparatively rarely explicitly mentioned. Among working class groups the connection between class and snobbery was certainly latent but not articulated in such terms. Stories of upward mobility, reflection by Europeans on British culture, and thoughts about the origins of taste were the sources of explicit mention of class. Most explicit were the Afro-Caribbean middle class (FG6) and the upwardly mobile in a group of lesbians (FG5). Thus, groups in different social locations exhibit different orientations towards culture and taste, and implicit understandings of social classification.

The middle class black group were sophisticated observers of the effects of taste (FG6). Bad taste was described as being common, or rude, or as typifying the behaviour of some classes. Good taste was thought worth learning properly because it might be personally profitable. Cultural hierarchy was affirmed in a complex and reflective awareness of the relationship between social environment, class, race and taste. Laura, describing the transitions from working class home, to grammar school, to Oxford to study law, said:

> I feel quite lucky in that I feel I understand, um, some middle-class. I mean I know that I'm classed as middle-class now because of my occupation but certain things would have been lost on me, I think, if I hadn't had the experience that I have of the educational system. Like, right, I know when a white middle-class person is being condescending and ironic towards me, um, and I know that I've worked with colleagues who haven't had that experience who don't necessarily know that they're being treated in a condescending manner. It's just that thing, I think, that goes with certain types of people, certain types of values and I'm black that I've got, I think the tools to pick up on some of those and to work out how I'm going to deal with them (...) [for example, by] responding to a person in the same slightly condescending way but which they understand that I know what's going on and I'm not going to be treated in that way.

And Eric said "it's fair to say that different classes communicate in different ways," a phenomenon also recognised by working class groups.

When asked to define good taste the group of young skilled manual workers discussed extensively money and possessions. Consider the following exchange where Jess, continuing a discussion of eating out tried to identify good taste:

> Jess: Fine wines and just having the money [pause], I think good taste is just having the money to go to a really posh restaurant where they get their food in fresh. Rather than, when you go to a pub it's all frozen.
> Kate: And antiques…
> Kev: It all boils [down] to money.
> Kate: It does, yes.
> Kev: If I was a millionaire now, or say if like, a millionaire walked in here now and looked at us lot, he say, "Oh God!"
> Wayne: There's a lot too much judging going on in the world, like.
> Kev: Yes.
> Wayne: Yeah there is too much judging. Like people, you [referring to the moderator] are saying "what kind of people would go to the theatre?" and we would, like not through any fault of anybody's, but if we went to the theatre and watched them walking out we'd be judging them as geeks.
> Kev: And they'd be judging us.
> Wayne: Yeah, like, "Look at the piss-heads."
> Kate: Yes, they'd be judging.

Moderator: What's your definition of a geek, just roughly?
Wayne: Just somebody who doesn't know how to have any fun.
Steve: Doesn't seem to have fun like. Just does boring things.
Kev: Doesn't like a laugh.
Daz: Just someone who's opposite to us.
Wayne: Probably somebody who's quite happy in themselves but we'd call them a geek and they'd call us piss-heads or a bum or something.
Moderator: Yes. And would that put you off going to these sorts of places?
Wayne: No. I don't really care about the opinions of anybody. Everybody has got their own opinion. So.

This discussion, which continued at length in similar vein, reveals a strong sense of social differences, implicitly, but not explicitly, redolent of class hostility. Taste is a means of identifying social groups, and is clearly associated with a sense of social hierarchy, of superiority and inferiority. The others are "opposite to us." A similar message came from the group of unskilled manual workers (FG14). Gaz asked a rhetorical question, "Who tells us what is a good picture and what isn't? Who decides what gets hung up somewhere?" and concluded that it was "Those who've got the say" who, he quipped, "I don't know who they are, do I? I'll tell you they're nor from around here, though." In another instance, an exchange within the group of supervisors of manual workers (FG12) rejected cultural paternalism:

Yvonne: Like Owen said, people want to go out and be entertained. They don't want to have to think and think it's good for you.
Ryan: You don't want to be told it's good for you.

A tension, between sensing an externally defined hierarchical cultural order and asserting, as did Carol (FG14), that it is "just your opinion," your "personal preference," emerged in each working class group, but ultimately, as with the perceived condescension of the theatre goers, it was agreed that the opinions of others could and should be ignored.

While personal preference was regularly invoked as a basis for choice, all the working class groups exhibited a strong collective attachment to their cultural pursuits. The skilled workers (FG8) agreed that if one of them were to do something new the rest would be very likely to join in. However, some types of potentially new activities were inconceivable, as was made explicit with respect to ballet among men in manual supervisory roles (FG12). There was always first a barrier of potential ridicule to be overcome. Humour emerged as a very strong means of social control over cultural activity (in fear of appearing pretentious, it would seem) among the working class (FG8, FG12, FG14). For example, asked whether it would matter if Kev took up ballroom dancing, Wayne (FG8) said "I wouldn't mind. I'd take the piss out of

him." And in turn, Wayne, contemplating dressing like a pop star, avowed "I might get the Mick taken."

As shown in the dialogue among the skilled workers above, the working class conceive taste less as a function of complex aesthetic judgment and more as an orientation towards goods, fun and entertainment. Working class participants are often uncomfortable with culture; for instance, one group's discussion concluded with the observation, "I disagree totally with Art" (FG12). More attention focused on moral than aesthetic bad taste. Moral bad taste can be identified easily and people can and should be held to account. Cultural bad taste was very hard to define but, where identified, was definitely not a reason for despising people. This seems to be common to working class groups, but less an issue for the younger middle class, for whom arguably aesthetics has supplanted ethics as mode of judging cultural commodities.

The working class, then, has a distinctive alternative understanding of cultural judgment, seeing it as they practice it, as a group matter. They exhibit a form of group solidarity; and they are more aware of groups aligned in opposition to one another. It is collective rather than individualised disagreement and learning new tastes is a matter of social network connections (and of exclusion too). Middle class group members, by contrast, while still retaining a latent suspicion that a disinterested claim to good taste is possible, seemed to employ greater personal autonomy in determining their cultural involvements. Posturing around issues of class and culture is not evidence of intense class hostility, but people defer to standards, seeing them as marking class differences and as having implications for gradations of social status. There are notably few claims to superiority by those endowed with greatest cultural capital, but there is an undertone of resentment of the distinction effect among the black middle class and the working class groups.

Discussion

The focus groups showed evidence, albeit complex and ambivalent, of the co-existence of weak boundaries, omnivorous orientation and class-based distinction as predicted by Holbrook *et al.* [2002]. It is worth signalling briefly that the same conclusion can be drawn from the survey results. The survey asked questions about cultural participation, knowledge and taste across a range of domains, including music, reading, art, film and television. Questions were sometimes about genres, sometimes about specific items, practices or producers. Responses suggest that there are some things that many people like. For example, 67 per cent said that they liked the paintings of Van Gogh, 64 per cent liked Frank Sinatra's *Chicago*, and 56 per cent

liked Vivaldi's *The Four Seasons*. No item that we asked about was liked by a greater proportion of the population than these: there is literally nothing that "everybody" likes. We also found people with omnivorous dispositions. When asked which of 39 items and genres they liked, the top quartile of respondents registered 14 or more, while the bottom quartile chose 6 or less. Regression analysis confirmed other studies in showing that it was the educated, white, middle class respondents who had the widest repertoire of tastes. There are also things that some groups like more than others. Distinction lurks behind the fact that the proportion of professionals who report liking modern literature, Mahler's *Fifth Symphony* and Miles Davis's *A Kind of Blue* is more than double that of the working class for the same items. Such survey results supplement the evidence from the focus groups in advancing some interpretive theses to account for the contemporary cultural landscape.

Aestheticisation and the Emergent Class of Cultural Intermediaries

Hierarchical cultural boundaries are not very salient for most people. Most judgments make little reference to aesthetic criteria and, when they do, they are mostly in a simplified aesthetic register. Most people are not routinely engaged in, and find it difficult when pushed, to enter into reflective aesthetic discourse of any degree of complexity. They know what they like, and justify it in terms of simple preference. The implication is that, except for areas of enthusiasm (and of course many people have some specialised expertise, for instance as media fans, collectors or hobbyists), neither reflective appreciation nor critical evaluation play much role in cultural appropriation. This is partly demonstrated by the fact that the majority do not see themselves as having criteria for evaluating cultural products and nor do they accept authoritative standards established by experts.

Matters are different among those with professional expertise in cultural production. The emergence and consolidation of a new fraction of the middle class, the cultural intermediaries, has had an impact. It is they in particular, among the young and educated, who are most exercised by, eloquent about and engaged with aesthetic standards. For some, the professionals in the cultural industries (FG20), this was a function of their everyday activity: there was widespread audible groaning when they were asked what they thought good taste was. They talked about taste precisely as a group of people who are required to have reflected upon such matters, for they pay attention to such issues in the course of their daily labours. Their discussion of bad taste included "covering issues which are really sensitive in a really insensitive way," fashions and changing taste, how the same item can be "tacky" or "cool" in

different contexts (including treating items "ironically"), and they used the terms "high culture" and "low culture" (though so did another group). Other professional groups, while not so insightful about the mechanisms involved, clearly acknowledged the issue of the relativity of judgments made from different positions. The cultural intermediaries also had a lengthy discussion about what one might admit to a colleague to liking; the possibilities of shame and embarrassment were considered, as was the idea that one might be "a traitor" if engaged in the Arts and then spent time in popular pursuits:

> Working in the Arts you know that there are all these wonderful things out there for you to experience and you're spending your free time going to watch Charlie's Angels.

This suggests that old cultural divisions are more than a distant memory. Some people at least still think in, with, or against those terms. It also suggests that this particular influential group operates with a specific discourse and set of concerns.

While aesthetic debate has proliferated and become intense in some quarters, notably among the personnel and functionaries of organisations for cultural intermediation, it has probably spread less than much social theory implies into everyday cultural consumption. People are mostly complacent about their own taste. Hardly anyone admitted to strategies for self-improvement involving changing taste, though there were individual exceptions. For most people cultural consumption was apparently less important than their work, their family lives and their social obligations.

Standards and Tolerance

Goodwill towards others and a relaxed view of judgment were frequently reiterated. Nevertheless, a substantial minority expressed their suspicion, if rather awkwardly, that not all is simply a matter of personal preference. Thus there was mention of "benchmarks" and the "snobbish arbiter;" the ambiguous status of reading the *News of the World* which detained one group; working class groups who resented agents pronouncing what was good for them. Since younger groups appear more flexible in their judgments it could be that benchmarks are increasingly the ghosts of past standards; certainly Alessandro's confession that he mobilises his university education to contest the very idea of good and bad taste implies that the effacing of cultural boundaries is, for some, a positive project. However, even those reluctant to abandon fixed standards of cultural quality were loath to turn aesthetic differences into judgments of social or moral worth. A strong sentiment exists against aligning aesthetic judgments with social evaluation. Most people asserted a form of moral or

social egalitarianism, which included acknowledgement of the tastes of others and a presumption that people should not look down on others on the basis of their tastes. They believe that snobbery exists but want to dissociate themselves personally from stigmatisation on the basis of aesthetic choices. This was particularly strong among the groups in weaker social positions (e.g. working class and African-Caribbean middle class). In addition, tolerance in relation to moral harm is refused; moral bad taste can be condemned, as, by implication, can its perpetrators.

The Retreat of Class?

De facto, there are hierarchically ordered tastes. Our survey demonstrate that, although people are much less confident in recognizing or justifying class or cultural hierarchy, there remains a significant association between class, education and legitimate taste [Gayo-Cal *et al.* 2006]. However, if aesthetic difference does not appear as social division, then the question arises whether the distribution of cultural capital matters and, if not, how social classification now operates. There is a reluctance to use class explicitly as a unit of social classification. The term class was used in less than a quarter of the focus groups, and mostly by the university educated middle class. Associated terms like snob and posh arose in an additional 25 per cent of groups. The language of class is in retreat in the cultural context, as it is in British political and social discourse more generally. Nevertheless, many focus group members recognised that social pressures operate to determine taste. Socialisation, both primary and secondary, social mobility, media output and fashion were among the forces mentioned. Half the population think that snobbery (probably the most heinous crime after being morally 'offensive' in the discussions) still exists; much anxiety was expressed about being seen to be pretentious or snobbish among working and middle class groups. Middle class reasoning about its cultural proclivities involves great reluctance to express sentiments of intellectual and aesthetic superiority, although such sentiments are at least residually present. Also working class people are still made to feel uncomfortable because of their exclusion from a full range of cultural activities.

Strong differences characterise the working and the middle class groups. This is probably partly a matter of their respective abilities to operate comfortably in a focus group discussion [Silva and Wright 2005], but equally it is evidence of a difference in orientation. There are class-based differences in the mode of appropriation of cultural forms. Omnivorousness and command of abstract critical judgment are particular to sections of the middle classes. The middle class are increasingly omnivorous, and

more likely to perceive opportunities arising from boundary effacement. Cultural intermediaries are particularly proficient in this regard. The effect is partly to create striking divisions within the middle class, between black and white, and young and old. Working class groups, by contrast, are not apparently obtaining any advantage. They are not internally divided over culture, but mostly because they are indifferent to it. Other concerns – religion, morality, family, and community – probably have greater priority.

Institutions and the Consecration of Culture: the Fate of Legitimate Culture

The evidence suggests that legitimate culture, in Bourdieu's sense, is in retreat. No one in the working class is much in awe of the consecrated; few of the middle class are exercised by the damage caused by popular culture. Laying claim to distinction through command of legitimate culture is not the sole driver of contemporary inequalities of culture. A primary reason is that processes of legitimisation or consecration in the UK today are not obviously operating in the way predicted by Bourdieu. More varied items and genres are accorded legitimacy, a corollary, or perhaps precondition of, the omnivorous disposition. We might therefore be inclined to assume that this is more a matter of changes in cultural than class boundaries. However, if there is boundary effacement, it is less that everyone likes the same things, more that the symbolic hierarchy of things has become blurred. It has become less clear what is legitimate, and what not.

Why? Probably not because individuals have become more reflexive and discriminating in the aesthetic domain; a restricted code and simple attachment to personal preferences predominate in members' accounts. Nor has there been significant oppositional resistance from subordinate groups; the working class may see itself as put upon, but this is met mostly with resigned acceptance. Perhaps we are witnessing a war of succession between the new generation of cultural intermediaries and an older dominant group in decline; a period of transition from one period of domination to another; in terms of theories of fields, we are witnessing the effects of intense battles in the cultural field.

However, it seems most likely that institutional changes have occurred to prevent the congealing of hegemonic and consecrated culture of a dominant class. The process whereby some cultural forms are made to appear socially significant and aesthetically valuable has been ruptured. There are a number of candidate forces behind this effect. First, the hegemony of the notion of consumer sovereignty and individual choice has encouraged the conviction that there is nothing beyond per-

sonal preference. However, while the discourse of the consumer provides a basis for the majority to think about taste as an individual property, hardly anyone adopted an explicit and fundamental consumer subject position for her or him self. Second, the lay understanding of postmodernist thought has de-stabilised cultural value by encouraging greater scepticism of all forms of intellectual authority. Third, processes for the delivery of formal cultural capital have changed: progressivism in schools, the marginalizing of a national cultural canon and wider access to university, where questioning orthodoxies is mandatory, blur boundaries. Fourth, the commodification of culture, its greater subjection to the logic of market competition, corrodes legitimacy. Commercial competition requires that whatever is promoted is presented as having some, if not equivalent, value, and success in economic competition is regulated as much by popularity as by attainment of quality. Consequently, the institutions of consecration no longer objectify cultural differences in a fashion which makes the process of social classification easily possible. Cultural boundaries are effaced. In turn, this makes espousal of an omnivorous disposition more comfortable. There are fewer prohibitions, and more kudos can be obtained from expressing openness to diversity.

Conclusions

There is widespread hesitancy about claiming that some cultural items are intrinsically better than others. This is less a crisis than a vacuum of judgment. Rarely were items identified as being in good taste, implying neither widespread recognition nor awe of legitimate culture.

A common norm has emerged which refuses to see cultural differences as indication of hierarchical social distinction; social position shall not be deduced from cultural taste. It is no longer, if it ever was, admissible to be thought snobbish. The middle class fear being thought snobbish, their statements being entirely consistent with the research indicating the spread of an omnivorous orientation, that openness to cultural diversity accompanying a multiculturalism which now attributes value to minority cultures. If all cultural forms have value then it would be perverse to condemn people because of their tastes. In that regard, at least within the context of a focus group discussion,[15] it is largely impermissible, especially among the middle class, to impugn the tastes of other individuals or groups. The exception, proving the rule, is the disparaging reference to "mushes," referred to as "chavs" in England, a

[15] Making fun of other people's taste is undoubtedly part of everyday humour and is present in an increasing number of programmes in the mass media.

section of the working class viewed as feckless and without taste. One reason for the success of *Distinction* was that it revealed a mechanism by which taste entrenched class power. Unmasked, the manipulation of legitimate culture could be seen as a vulgar social stratagem of the privileged and a source of injustice. Though not simply or directly the effect of sociological research, this process is now widely recognised and justifiably condemned. It has therefore become a much less effective and, on the basis of our evidence, infrequently adopted mode of conduct.

Nevertheless, a relationship between class, power and taste persists, one which Bourdieu might have embraced both theoretically and substantively. There are class-based differences in the mode of appropriation of cultural forms. Those in professional and higher managerial groups deal with culture in a distinctive manner. Omnivorousness and the command and exercise of abstract critical judgment are particular to sections of the middle classes. One can detect a self-congratulatory dimension, absent in other strata, to middle class cultural self-understanding based upon a cultivated and aesthetic orientation to cultural products. Refinement is claimed in ironic and reflective tone, rather than in terms of a natural inheritance of unquestioned good taste. Ability to incorporate elements of an omnivorous orientation and to handle, more or less confidently, boundary effacement becomes a mode of distinguished conduct in its own right. What Bourdieu thought achievable in France only through appropriation of legitimate culture is now finding other channels. Distinction is achieved less through a command of an exclusive legitimate culture. Presenting self via specialised and exclusive competence in high culture is not currently acceptable. Yet the privileged neither deny nor reject legitimate culture, for omnivorousness includes it. The manner of its incorporation is crucial and an omnivorous portfolio makes it available for deployment when convenient, for instance in the right context to express mutual recognition of social standing.

There also remains a sense in which working class people are made to feel uncomfortable because of their exclusion from either a wide range, or an intimate command, of some cultural activities. Continued social hostility is apparent between groups in different class positions, with intimations of working class resentment of middle class condescension. Subordinate groups are more conscious of the social effects of acknowledgement or denial of cultural competence than the inheritors; the working class is aware, the black middle class even more so. The white middle class, meanwhile, display ambivalence between cultural hostility and universal goodwill. However, these tensions are not expressed as matters of class distinction.

Middle and working class alike remain aware of the presence of snobbery. A presumption persists that condescension is rife. However, the cause of the discomfort seems more the critical scrutiny of peers than that of members of another class. Pre-

tentiousness is unacceptable, particularly among the working class, and contravention of the norm is punished though teasing and ridicule. The justice of wielding cultural capital as a mode of personal advancement is most challenged by the subordinate sections of the middle class. The black middle class group spontaneously came close to providing a Bourdieusian analysis of the relationship between position and taste. The working class were much less aware, and frankly were not very concerned about political issues other than state spending on the Arts. Hence taste does not seem to be a key link in a system of class *domination*. Morals and money are probably more important [Lamont 1992]. The evidence suggests that legitimate culture does operates neither as a system of social control nor as a key weapon in class domination, in the sense that it directly mediates, meaningfully and consciously, relations between classes.

Holbrook *et al.* [2002] are thus shown correct; there is no incompatibility between mass shared tastes, some people liking more things than others, and the existence of distinction. All three processes can be turned to the advantage of a privileged section of the population. Cultural capital thus does not operate exactly as in France in the 1960s. Yet social groups who hold economically privileged positions do use cultural competence for profit. The educated middle class manage their ambivalence, if not always without discomfort, to their own advantage.

These data cannot determine whether cultural capital creates an effect as strong as in the past. In 2003 few people made a positive stand for the superiority of particular cultural forms, and no one wanted to draw parallels between cultural and social worth. However, alternative means exist by which selective participation and expressed preferences act as assets either to be mobilised to impress others or to be otherwise converted to economic advantage. Possession of cultural capital is still a route to personal advancement. We are not witnessing the end of class-related cultural distinction. More likely, at present, the ethos of omnivorousness veils distinction. Distinction is not *primarily* acquired by professing a taste for legitimate culture. Probably the most profitable portfolio combines a degree of eclecticism with educational qualifications and appropriate forms of embodiment.

Command of legitimate culture is no longer, if indeed it ever was in the UK, an automatic source of prestige. Yet culture is not a matter of indifference for the middle classes, and for some sections it remains critical. Now cultural capital achieves its effects in a different manner, through an inclusive ethic, with a more practical eye to differentiation. The current mode is one whereby the judicious exercise of an omnivorous orientation represents distinguished conduct. This is not inimical to class reproduction. As Bottero [2005] argues, differential association routinely reproduces difference. It may be less directly an affront, or a cause injury, to the working class, or others deficient in cultural capital. But it may be no less effective in securing the

reproduction of the privilege of the professional class. Hence we should conclude that taste probably directly serves power less than before, and less than it did in France in the 1960s, but that its role is far from insignificant. Class distinctions persist but may be underestimated because omnivorousness and boundary effacement veil the role that cultural capital plays in the service of power.

Appendix 1: Composition of Focus Groups

Focus Groups

1. Rural service workers
2. Gay men
3. Retired middle class
4. Retired working class
5. Lesbians
6. Black middle class
7. Landowners
8. Skilled manual workers
9. Low paid women
10. Pakistani middle class
11. P akistani working class
12. Supervisors
13. Young professional & students
14. Unskilled workers
15. Benefit claimants
16. Agricultural workers
17. Black working class
18. Indian middle class
19. Indian working class
20. Professionals, cultural industries
21. Self employed
22. Professionals
23. Women Professionals
24. Business elites
25. Managers

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Does Taste Still Serve Power?

The Fate of Distinction in Britain

Abstract: Bourdieu impaled taste on power. Many subsequent accounts, citing an erosion of systematic cultural differentiation and a decline of class distinction, imply that taste no longer serves established power. The blurring of cultural boundaries and the spread of cultural omnivorousness are thought to have eliminated command of legitimate culture as a basis of hierarchical social classification. Focus groups, conducted in Britain in 2003, are used to explore the relationship between social classification, taste and power. Very diverse groups of Britons talking about good and bad taste, aesthetic standards, social comparison and social relationships suggest continuity as well as change in the nexus of legitimate culture and class domination. It is argued that while class inequalities have changed little, effects occurring directly through judgments of taste have attenuated. Uncertainty about standards of judgment and a reluctance to read taste as an indicator of social worth produce much ambivalence surrounding classification. Command of legitimate culture is no longer the sole means to obtain social esteem from expressions of taste. Other means can be detected: boundary effacement and omnivorous orientations serve to conceal the effects of power previously attributed to legitimate cultural capital.

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