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## Comment on Alan Warde/2

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Saggi

## Comment on Alan Warde/2

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### **To B(ourdieu) or not to B(ourdieu)?**

The association between taste profiles and the social matrix has been depicted in the literature on cultural consumption in various ways, all of which position themselves in relation to Bourdieu's theory of cultural stratification. This literature can be roughly divided into two main clusters. One asserts that particular constellations of tastes and consumption preferences are associated with specific occupations or class fractions and with the distinctions that operate within a particular society at a particular point in history. At the very least, this approach argues for some type of correspondence between social and cultural hierarchies. The other argues that heterogeneity of tastes is coupled with the disappearance of class and the dissolution of clear cultural boundaries more generally. A consumer culture that results in a proliferation of images and identities cannot be hierarchized into a system that correlates with specific social divisions, meaning that individuals in pluralistic societies are no longer captives of tastes. This implies that styles and genres are becoming weaker as indicators of class or socioeconomic position.

Alan Warde's paper engages with the debate between those two clusters of research and provides a fascinating glimpse into the social contours of taste in Twenty-first century Britain. Warde's paper has an ambiguous relationship with Bourdieu's work. Bourdieu's main emphasis is on the role taste plays in creating social classifications in the process of symbolic struggles that feed class formation and class domination. The driving logic and the justification of Bourdieu's work lies in class analysis. But for Warde, at least part of the story is that class is sometimes relevant and

sometimes not. How can this contradiction be reconciled? I submit that the validity of class distinction is not critical here because Warde's work is about boundaries of varying kinds; it is about multiple distinctions, cleavages, and hierarchies.

Following Holbrook *et al.* [2002], Warde interprets findings from the analysis of focus group discussions as evidence for the concurrent existence of several metaphors that capture cultural stratification in Britain. Thus, he argues that the "contemporary cultural landscape" is comprised of the coexistence of weak boundaries, omnivorous orientations, and class-based distinctions. This approach elaborates the idea of cultural stratification beyond social inequality. It emphasizes the way structures of social inequalities, with economic as well as cultural sources, are hierarchically and vertically systematically interrelated. Warde is able to find support for three competing models of cultural stratification because he explores taste in a fresh and inclusive way, which leads to an emphasis on taste as multiplicity.

### **Taste as Multiplicity**

Common indicators of taste preferences in the sociological literature include leisure pastimes, cultural consumption, and cultural tastes related to clothing, music, reading, design, and more. In his paper, Warde adds to this list a variety of supplementary aspects that can be included in the cultural capital toolbox. While this may appear as a confusion of activities, preferences, values, and morals, I would argue that it is in fact beneficial to mix all of these aspects together exactly because studies tend to separate them (one could imagine an even broader list, which would include amateur artistic activities, voluntary activities, membership in associations and clubs, practicing hobbies, ICT usage, visiting and hosting, going to parties, conversing on the phone, and eating out). This emphasis on consumption as multiplicity is warranted because cultural tastes are contextual and complex, making it very important to consider combinations of cultural fields of consumption. Boundaries between spheres of consumption are no longer given – they are pluralized and discretionary because of the multiple ways they can be drawn and contested [Slater and Ritzer 2001]. Different taste cultures (exemplified to some degree by common features among different focus group participants) represent clusters of cultural forms, which, in addition to cultural tastes, preferences, and behavior, encompass values and aesthetic standards. Each and every aspect of these cultural forms is potentially a cultural resource exchangeable in different markets.

Research tends to locate the position of individuals on one-dimensional axes of cultural consumption. The ubiquitous example is the highbrow-lowbrow distinc-

tion. This empirical bias toward one-dimensional measures does not square with the idea that individuals employ a repertoire of cultural resources and interests [Swidler 1986; Erickson 1996]. Multiple consumer identities are generated in the global consumer market that has created global elites or global consumption classes that follow the same consumption styles, showing preferences for global brands [Robinson and Goodman, 1995]. Conceptualizing a framework that incorporates diverse repertoires of taste components lies at the heart of a multidimensional understanding of individuals and their position in society in terms of identity and resources. Warde's work convincingly tackles taste in a broad way by incorporating both taste and talk about taste. But what Warde actually does is to go back to depicting cultural dispositions in the Bourdieusian sense, that is, as pertaining to moral, aesthetic, and ethical stances. This is why taste seems to take on different meanings in the focus group discussions. It is variously an attribute of an item, a procedure of judgment, a capacity to judge, an objective standard, or a personal preference. For some groups taste is a "function of complex aesthetic judgment." For others it is "an orientation towards goods, fun and entertainment." For yet others taste is morality, or normative behavior. Thus, when discussing standards and tolerance, Warde actually describes a disposition that stresses "goodwill towards others and a relaxed view of judgment." Elsewhere, in the section on "distinction, snobbery and class," he mentions that a survey conducted for a different part of his research project revealed a reluctance to explicitly use class as a unit of social classification because of an anxiety among working and middle class groups that they might be considered pretentious or snobbish. While Warde finds that most individuals are not engaged in reflective aesthetic discourse, matters are different among professional experts in cultural production. Young and educated cultural intermediaries are eloquent about aesthetic standards and "this group operates with a specific discourse and set of concerns." This means that individuals are equipped with certain dispositions on what is appropriate when talking about taste.

### **Consumption Generates Relationships**

In addition to articulating the link between tastes and bases of inequality, Warde's paper invokes an approach that thinks of taste and consumption patterns as creating their own social categories, or as generating axes of meaning. Such an approach recognizes lifestyles and tastes as new dimensions of stratification, conflict, and identification, and explores the social consequences of consumption.

Taste publics can be theorized as representing groupings or "tribes" that emerge through the medium of shared symbolic codes of stylized behavior, taste, and moral

ethics [Maffesoli 1996]. Both cultural consumption and cultural participation lead consumers to challenge or reinforce social cohesion in consumption communities and in society at large. Such consumption communities play a role in political-economic accounts of power [Featherstone 1991]. It is not surprising, then, that the title of the paper links taste with power. In this context, I would introduce Giddens' differentiation between distributive groupings and status groups [Giddens 1973]. Distributive groupings denote common patterns of consumption regardless of any conscious evaluation of their prestige. Status groups, on the other hand, derive their coherence from evaluations of prestige. Individuals in status groups tend to share similar attitudes and beliefs that are linked to a common style of life. Status group consciousness involves the recognition that behavior and attitudes signify a particular group affiliation and that other groups exist as well. Therefore, a systematic analysis of cultural consumption aims to discover how these groupings are expressed in identities, actions, and values. Along these lines, several works have demonstrated how cultural consumption shapes inequality in processes of group closure and exclusion and affects school grades [DiMaggio 1982], educational aspirations and attainment [DiMaggio and Mohr 1985; Aschaffenburg and Maas 1997], and social networks [Lizardo 2006].

### **Concluding Thoughts**

I shall conclude with three suggestions for future research. First, an interesting insight that emerges from the paper and that could be the subject of further inquiry is that bad taste is not symmetrical with good taste. In particular, it is easier to articulate the nature of (moral) bad taste than that of good taste. Bad taste provokes stronger feelings and is perceived as an embarrassment. While good taste is personal, bad taste is public. This resonates with previous research that has emphasized the investigation of disliking rather than liking cultural genres, claiming that disliking a genre requires much more commitment from individuals [Bryson 1996; Garcia-Alvarez *et al.* 2007]. This brings up another puzzle, namely, how come there are so few claims to the superiority or legitimacy of specific tastes? If no one knows what good taste is and no one admits to having it, and if taste does not serve to establish supremacy, then what is the role of good taste after all? Does it matter if people are aware of a cultural hierarchy in society or not when the elite – e.g., professionals – is aware of this hierarchy and uses it for cultural reproduction?

Second, the paper provokes an examination of taste formation and the rhetoric of taste formation. Taste formation processes refer to the production of symbolic

meanings that are the result of configurations of power and privilege. Therefore, research on cultural capital must consider dynamic and volatile forms of taste production. Hierarchies of taste are ever changing and the meanings of highbrow, lowbrow, elite taste, popular taste, and so on, are changing as well.

Lastly, another direction for future research is to attempt to explore a wider range of consumption styles that could capture various realms of cultural consumption, such as gay and lesbian lifestyles, simple living, green lifestyles, gendered cultural tastes, and children's cultural consumption. For example, the development of a gay sub-culture involves distinct cultural consumption patterns [Chasin 2001]. GLBT individuals have been targeted as a separate consumer group through advertising and media representations just as they have become economically powerful as a social group. The construction of a gay identity is realized through dress style, body care, leisure-time pursuits, media products, and other consumption preferences, some of which reflect cultural dispositions. An additional example of the horizon of consumption styles would be the role of the Informational Society and the effects of the ICT revolution on the consequences of consumption. Since information and knowledge are deeply embedded in societies' cultures, cultural and symbolic processing become direct productive forces that blur the traditional distinction between production and consumption. The manipulation of symbols becomes the fundamental source of productivity and competitiveness, and in a complex society it depends on a variety of cultural and institutional conditions, among them leisure, cultural recreation, and consumption [Castells 1996]. Internet-related consumption engenders inequality by mediating the relationship between individuals' identities and their use of technologies [DiMaggio *et al.* 2001]. Cultural consumption research ought to address the features of digital consumption as Internet technologies continue to develop.

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Abstract: This comment discusses Alan Warde's paper in the context of several debates in the literature on cultural consumption. I try to highlight the ways Warde's interpretation of his data extends central concepts and theories that are prevalent in the study of cultural stratification. I suggest two emphases that are inspired by Warde's work and could be pursued in future research: taste as multiplicity and relationships generated by consumption.

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*Keywords: cultural consumption, taste, distinction, cultural capital, inequality.*

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