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Comment on Alan Warde/3

by Elliot B. Weininger

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Alan Warde's paper is somewhat difficult to evaluate – and this for at least two reasons. On the one hand, analyzing a qualitative data set which contains information on no fewer than twenty-five social and demographic categories of respondents, Warde can present only a vanishingly small amount of primary data within the constraints of an essay. Although not all of these groups make an appearance in the text, the majority do, placing Warde in the difficult position of having to summarize large swathes of data – an issue, I suspect, that will be particularly salient for non-British readers. On the other hand, however, it seems to me that some of the difficulty of appraising the paper derives from Warde's refusal to select just one of the figures that emerged from the focus groups on which the paper is based and place it at the center of a simple narrative which (putatively) encapsulates the orientation to culture in contemporary Britain. Instead, following the lead of Holbrook, Weiss, and Habich [2002], Warde remains open to the existence of multiple tendencies which, it would seem, are by no means incapable of coexisting. Thus, in addition to the oft-analyzed omnivore, we find in his paper a wide array of sociological personages: the individualistic consumer, the moralist, the snob and the anti-snob, the piss-head, and the geek, etc., along with those who are openly confused. (Univores, interestingly, appear to be absent from this roster.) The reality of the situation, it would seem, is somewhat obscure, without for all that having dissolved into a patternless fog, and Warde is to be commended for attempting to capture and analyze it as such.

The paper grows out of a large project on *Cultural Capital and Social Exclusion* (CCSE). The project is notable for collecting a broad array of data concerning cultural tastes and practices by multiple means: the focus groups analyzed by Warde

were populated by individuals who had previously responded to a large-scale survey; household interviews were also carried out with a subset of respondents. Given this admirable multi-method design, some of Warde's findings, I think, become particularly salient when viewed in the context of other published results from the project. I would like to consider on just two of his findings:

1) The lack of "objective standards" of taste and the related issue of cultural "consecration";

2) The cultural orientations of the working class and of those with a tenuous attachment to the labor market.

Selecting just these issues obviously leaves much that is of interest in Warde's piece uncommented on.¹ However, given both the scope of Warde's analysis and the multiplicity of "effects," it seems reasonable to try to push the discussion in the direction of specificity.

Cultural Capital without Symbolic Capital?

The Kantian judgment of taste, famously interpreted by Bourdieu as the codified expression of a bourgeois aesthetic orientation, is characterized as a purely subjective response to the object which nevertheless requests universal assent. Warde's focus group participants, by contrast, do not place much stock in the workings of a *sensus communis*. Instead, many of them express what would seem, at least at first glance, to be an egalitarian view: "one person's taste is as good as the next." Thus, at a quasi-normative level, "personal preference" reigns for the majority in matters of taste, accompanied by a widespread disinclination to judge the judgments of others. Unsurprisingly, then, Warde also reports frequent denunciations of both snobishness and pretension. To be sure, one can reasonably suspect that in many cases the emphasis on the "personal" is less a matter of principle than convenience, recusing the individual from having to put his taste on the line. That said, indifference to culture poses no threat to the premise of an open landscape in which each can develop her own tastes over time, undertaking cultural investments whose value is purely individual, and which are thereby immunized against the push and pull of "market" forces.

Needless to say, however, this Edenic picture does not exhaust the story. As Warde notes early on, numerous participants insist that snobbery abounds, while only one will admit to practicing it. More to the point, the quasi-normative view coexists

¹ In particular, the degree to which factors such as nativity and sexual orientation are implicated in taste configurations has rarely received consideration in the literature.

with an acknowledgement – found in wide array of socio-demographic groups – of the empirical existence of aesthetic hierarchies (as with those who claim license to enjoy cultural “trash” *qua* trash).² Hence the palpable confusion.

This confusion extends to the whole issue of “consecration.” No matter how firmly the ethos of personal preference is rooted in the collective mindset, it remains obvious that the whole apparatus of cultural sacralization – populated by critics, curators, professors, cultural journalists, prize committees, etc. – is still intact.³ Warde reports, however, that participants evince some perplexity over whether and how much to credit the judgments of “experts,” and in some cases express open disdain for professional canonizers.⁴ Furthermore, Warde suggests, the “experts” are themselves so variegated in their tastes and opinions that the contours of the canon may become blurry, greatly reducing the ability of critical imprimatur to function as a warrant of status claims.

To the extent that this is the case, status honor cannot really accrue to individuals simply on the basis of their capacity to select among a clearly delimited set of legitimated works. Nevertheless, symbolic capital re-appears in a slightly more abstract form: “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.” Similar, perhaps, to the members of the “dominant class” in Bourdieu’s work who are able to artfully consume or appreciate even the most trivial objects – as mentioned by Warde in the opening section of his essay – these omnivores are able to comfortably maneuver in a terrain that lacks clear landmarks and still find their reward.⁵

This assessment is consistent with the line of argumentation developed by Peterson and colleagues early on concerning cultural omnivores, and has been in-

² Predictably, one also finds here and there a quasi-sociological view in which taste is said to be a function of class, race, gender, etc.

³ Although it too has obviously undergone various transformations in recent decades. For an account of some of these, see the impressionistic but interesting study by English [2005].

⁴ Without wanting to overstate its significance, I do feel that it is important to register the fact that the data from the project apparently yield at least one significant exception to this trend: “Focus group discussions amongst young professionals, black middle classes, lesbians and gays (who were largely recruited from within professional circles) and cultural professionals were the most au fait with contemporary literary trends and made reference to recent prominent or prize-winning titles, such as those gaining the Booker Prize or Orange Prize. (...) [T]his suggests the particular location of an interest in the literary in professional, metropolitan and relatively privileged circles” [Wright 2006: 132-133]. Here again it is necessary to remain open to the possibility of competing trends.

⁵ As Warde clearly recognizes, these omnivores are not entirely dissimilar to the “new cultural intermediaries” described by Bourdieu, whose taste for legitimate culture is complemented by flirtations with popular culture, but approached through an “‘academic’ disposition” [Bourdieu 1984: 360] – even if they do not share the former group’s experience of downward mobility.

voked widely since, as sociologists have attempted to track these mysterious creatures throughout their natural habitat [see Peterson 2005, which provides a comprehensive review of the literature to that date]. However, it seems to me that we still know relatively little about this aspect of the “omnivore phenomenon.” How are omnivores evaluated *in situ* – both by other omnivores and by non-omnivores? Do they even constitute a socially (as opposed to sociologically) recognizable type – and if so, in what settings? Do the focus groups provide us with insight into the figure of the omnivore as an object of “perception and appreciation”?

Taste and Anti-Taste

The omnivore thesis has, arguably, driven the majority of the research over the last fifteen years into social stratification and taste. The primary question has been, by and large, whether the omnivorous orientation is concentrated in particular social positions (defined in terms of educational attainment, social class, occupational status, income – and more recently – gender, age, and ethnicity).⁶ At admitted risk of oversimplification, it seems to me that this has led to a relative loss of interest in various taste configurations that are not easily located within an omnivore/paucivore/univore schema, or at the least, led researchers to concentrate attention on the full variety of such configurations only insofar as placement on this schema is problematic.⁷ In light of this, one of the most appealing aspects of the CCSE data are their ability to enable us to look, in detail, at an unusually wide range of taste patterns. Warde’s paper raises numerous interesting issues in this regard, of which I would like to highlight just one.

The analysis of the focus groups composed of participants from various segments of the working-class is, in many ways, consistent with expectations: we find tendencies such as the inclination to regard cultural objects through the lens of morality and a general emphasis on conformity with the local social group. To be sure, Warde’s summary of working-class taste is forcefully expressed: this configuration entails

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’.

⁶ More recently, of course, a number of researchers have argued that omnivorousness itself is a variegated phenomenon. Again, see the discussion in Peterson [2005], as well as Warde, Wright, and Gayo-Cal [2007], and Ollivier [forthcoming].

⁷ The term “paucivore” is taken from Chan and Goldthorpe [2007].

Despite the emphatic formulation, this assessment does not, it seems to me, depart in any dramatic way from earlier research on working-class taste. Perhaps because of this, Warde offers us very little insight into the actual content of this taste. Indeed, his conclusion asserts that the various segments of the working-class are generally apathetic when it comes to aesthetics: “Other concerns – religion, morality, family and community – probably have greater priority.”

However, Warde’s discussion of the working class becomes more intriguing if viewed in the context of results from the CCSE’s large-scale probability sample. In particular, Gayo-Cal, Savage, and Warde [2006], using multiple correspondence analysis, have produced a “cultural map of the United Kingdom” that combines data on an extraordinarily wide array of cultural practices and taste-commitments (including both genres and particular works) which constitutes an interesting backdrop to the focus group information.⁸ One of their more striking results concerns not simply what kinds of culture occupy people, but whether people are occupied at all:

[T]he major rift is between those who express likings (...) and those who are disengaged and who do not appear to have any obvious likes. We need to (...) caution that this finding depends on the variables used to construct the space of lifestyles, and that it could be that...[the individuals located in this portion of the map] have tastes and forms of participation that we did not ask about. But, as should be clear (...), we did ask about a wide range of cultural forms [Gayo-Cal *et al.* 2006: 230; my addition].

Elsewhere, they declare that

[T]he overriding impression of this particular configuration of activities is one of disengagement from, and even rejection of, many forms of cultural activity. The dislikes are for those items associated with established high culture, but there are no alternative positive preferences to suggest some substitute vibrant popular cultural life [*ibidem*: 219].

Needless to say, this tendency has a definite social homologue: it predominates among respondents who, in addition to being young, are members of the working class (or who have a tenuous connection the labor market), as well as those with low levels of educational attainment.⁹ Given the degree of working-class disconnection

⁸ This article should be recommended in the strongest terms. It goes without saying that the authors’ achievement derives not from having learned a statistical technique made popular by Bourdieu, but in going well-beyond the majority of recent literature on taste by combining, into a single “cartographic” description, data that cover both practices and attitudes while simultaneously spanning numerous cultural forms that are themselves internally stratified (into highbrow, lowbrow, etc.).

⁹ It should be noted that older members of the working class are by no means exempt from the inclination to disengagement and rejection in matters of culture; in their case, however, the data also evidence some “positive” orientations towards elements of popular culture (Gayo-Cal *et al.* 2006: 230).

from non-highbrow culture suggested by the survey, it seems to me that the focus group data become all the more important. However, it is not the negative attitude towards theater-goers that calls for analysis (as with the conversation about “geeks” that Warde reproduces); rather, it is the relation to “popular” culture. What stance do the working-class participants (and the unemployed or under-credentialed) assume towards pop and rock, football, etc.? Do the focus groups provide us with indications of areas in which the survey may have been insufficient – that is, areas which, had they been included, would have begun to reveal the contours of a “positive” working-class taste? Should questions about, say, particular genres of music been more finely differentiated?

With respect to these questions, I will simply state the obvious by saying that, if we broaden the concept of culture along anthropological lines, we will certainly encounter a plethora of “obvious likes” and “positive preferences” at some point. But this does not absolve us from the need to determine just how deeply-seated and how wide in scope working-class apathy and antipathy really are, how they play out in everyday life, and how they function in both cross-class and intra-class encounters. While those with a better grasp of the contemporary British situation may be non-plussed by this aspect CCSE data, it seems to me that, at the very least, there is nothing in it which disconfirms the rather bleak portrait to be found in, say, Charlesworth [2000]. Thus, I would venture that the time seems ripe to place working-class taste at the center of sociological attention, despite all the difficulties that such work can entail.

Studying the Landscape

Warde’s paper, and by extension, the work of the CCSE team, has the potential to move the sociology of taste forward in numerous ways. While obviously important for its ability to contribute to the topics and debates that already populate the agenda, I am particularly hopeful that these data will compel us to broaden that agenda. Unlike the Kantian aesthete, sociologists are not disinterested in the reality of the objects they work so hard to apprehend. We therefore should not allow ourselves settle for a truncated view. To be sure, much work remains to be done with Warde’s data – including a fuller consideration of the relation between the survey results and the qualitative results. But that is merely a reason to look forward to the book.

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Abstract: Alan Warde's analysis of the focus group data from the *Cultural Capital and Social Exclusion* (CCSE) project is notable both because it remains open to the possibility that contemporary taste patterns are subject to multiple forms of differentiation, and because it acknowledges the deep-seated uncertainty (and even confusion) that some people express in matters of taste. From Warde's wide-ranging analysis, I rather arbitrarily select two issues that I think require further development using the CCSE data: 1) the question of whether and how "cultural omnivores" – the object of a colossal literature in cultural sociology – are actually apprehended in everyday interaction; and 2) whether currently popular schemas, such as the omnivore/univore and highbrow/lowbrow distinctions, are in fact sufficient to capture the relation to culture that predominates in various segments of the working class, the unemployed, and the under-credentialed.

Keywords: taste, class, symbolic capital, omnivorousness, cultural legitimacy, popular culture.

Elliot B. Weininger is an Assistant Professor of Sociology at SUNY-Brockport. After completing his dissertation at the CUNY Graduate Center, he worked as a post-doctoral research fellow with Annette Lareau at Temple University. That project resulted in a number of articles concerning the impact of social class on various dimensions of family life, and especially childrearing. With Lareau, he is beginning a multi-method study on the role of the role that schooling considerations play in parents' decisions concerning residential location. Additionally, his chapter on Pierre Bourdieu's concept of social class was recently published in the volume *Approaches to Class Analysis* (2005), edited by Erik Olin Wright. During 2007-2008, he is on leave at the Population Studies Center at the University of Pennsylvania.