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# ”Does Taste Still Serve Power?”: A Response to the Comments

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## “Does Taste Still Serve Power?": A Response to the Comments

by Alan Warde

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I am very grateful to my critics for their generous and constructive comments. Perhaps it was in the nature of the original paper, with space to present only scant primary data, that there is little challenge to the overall argument or the detail of the interpretation. Only Michael Eve, with his suspicion that I have exaggerated the extent of change over time and/or the difference between my evidence and that of Bourdieu, raises a fundamental challenge. Tally Katz-Gerro and Elliot Weininger kindly commend and apparently accept most of my substantive claims and focus instead on unanswered questions, on further issues for research. My reply, therefore, addresses some topics initially dealt with only in passing, drawing on other components of the research project to offer additional insight.

Eve makes out that I have exaggerated the extent of change in the relationship between class and culture. While it is almost impossible to avoid addressing the issue of power, class and taste without some implicit reference to past conditions, I tried to do so with restraint. Adequate evidence for a thoroughly convincing comparison is not available. Nevertheless, recourse to historical work, like that of McKibbin [1998], makes it hard to imagine that cultural boundaries, classifications and judgments did not change significantly in the second half of the twentieth century in Britain.

Eve also suggests that the findings I report are little different from Bourdieu's – if properly understood, since Eve contends that the interpretation published in *Distinction* misrepresented the evidence. He implies that a strong and unreformed Bourdieusian analysis of the role of taste in class reproduction can be sustained. I do not agree. Both Weininger and Katz-Gerro gently hint, probably justifiably, that my theoretical conclusions are not entirely transparent (though neither consider them

Bourdieuian). I took some care not to adopt Bourdieusian concepts for explanatory purposes. Rather I have preferred to pose questions in the spirit of Bourdieu and present answers in a generally theoretically neutral fashion. This reflects some uncertainty on my part about how best to account theoretically for the evidence which, *pace* Holbrook *et al.* [2002], reveals boundary-effacing, omnivorous and distinction effects. (I am not, incidentally, persuaded that Weber or Maffesoli provide a better answer).

Provisionally, I conjecture that a more complex and refined usage of the metaphor of cultural capital will give the greatest analytic purchase, but only if it is detached from a unique relation to legitimate culture. Perhaps the most characteristic feature of Bourdieu's account is its reliance on legitimate culture; it reconciles the postulate of substantively arbitrary judgments of aesthetic worth with the capacity for dominant classes to establish their preferred forms as most valuable, hence permitting their own members, and others, to recognise it as a mark of social standing. In Britain, legitimate culture still can be identified [see Warde and Bennett 2008]. It remains the virtual monopoly of the professional and executive class, and continues to have more value than popular culture when converted, as cultural capital, into other forms of capital. However, additional sources of cultural value and other orientations towards cultural products now also confer social distinction. Taste can serve power by other means besides command of legitimate culture – something hard to appreciate from within a purely Bourdieusian framework but probably more obvious in Britain than in France. The wide range of cultural forms which now populate the cultural field do not easily submit to analysis in terms of legitimacy. For example, McKibbin [1998, 238] noted that recruiters to senior executive positions in the UK after the second world war valued sporting, social and linguistic skills most highly – no mention of a command of the classics or the national literary canon. Or again, the various manifestations of an omnivorous orientation, *de rigueur* among the middle classes, problematise the relation between legitimate culture and social honour.

Eve's defence of Bourdieu hangs on his scepticism about my interpretation of the focus group evidence because of two absences. First, contrary to his theoretical expectations, the transcripts do not produce strong intimations of superiority and subordination traditionally associated with inter-class relationships. Second, nor do they reveal much expressed aesthetic revulsion, which Eve asserts is part of everyone's routine conversations. While both class hostility and aesthetic revulsion find expression, and I discuss instances which do appear to indicate continuity with the past, they are neither very prominent nor widely announced. Weininger, as well as Eve, wonders if the first is a matter of misrecognition. Perhaps these people are *really* using judg-

ments of taste to attribute characteristics and dispositions to groups which in their own minds equate with hierarchically-ranked positions and differential worth. Perhaps deeper analysis would identify processes of concealment and deception which would exonerate Bourdieusian theory? We should never suspend such suspicion, a lesson indeed to be learned from Bourdieu. Middle class focus group members might be unwittingly deluding themselves in their belief that they bear no ill will and feel no condescension with respect to people with tastes other than their own. However, the views they express, the reading of their statements in context, and the observations of the convenors' observations on the events do not suggest that they were deliberately trying to mislead the convenor or inadvertently deceiving themselves.

Ultimately, there is no unequivocal form of evidence by means of which to confirm or reject such suspicion. However, focus groups are probably more likely than most methods, for example interviews, to expose this type of dissembling. Especially because some of these focus groups were comprised of friends and acquaintances (which I didn't make clear in the article), it is reasonable to think that these transcripts record ways in which groups of personal associates do normally talk about issues of culture. (Incidentally, to correct one misperception, the focus groups *preceded* the survey). Professionals could have said to each other that they disliked working class people because of their tastes, but they didn't. In fact, the British now seem rarely to use aesthetic preferences as indicators of personal worth. This reluctance may be the corollary of the widespread uncertainty about standards; a level of confidence in one's own judgment, not readily apparent in the population, is required in order to condemn others. Consequently, most people register, without ranking, the fact that social groups have patterned and distinctive tastes. The reason behind that fact, and here I agree entirely with Eve's suggestion, is that taste plays a role in differential association. It is through selection and maintenance of friendship and companionship that cultural taste has greatest effect in class reproduction. However, that is a link which is indirect, complex and also variable between social groups, and not equivalent to a simple association between taste and class.

On other matters, I can only agree with Weininger that more attention should be paid to the content of working class tastes and practices. Cultural sociology, partly because of recent centrality of the omnivore debate, has devoted much of its energy towards understanding the changing relationship of the middle classes to legitimate culture. Through this lens the working class comes to be defined by the absence of an omnivorous orientation and by its lack of engagement with legitimate culture. In itself, this characterisation is not misleading; other parts of the study confirm that the working class exhibits almost total indifference to, and lack of participation in, legitimate culture and, hence, does not display tastes transgressing the boundary between

high and low culture which defines the omnivore. However, many tastes, especially in film, TV and sport, are *shared* with the middle class. Moreover, the working class apparently feels neither deprived in nor resentful of its cultural situation. At the same time, however, if there was a coherent and distinctive working class culture in the past, then it has disappeared. Few distinctive substantive component elements characterise the working class as an entity. But this is not justification for identifying them as "univores," a term which should be banished from the sociological lexicon until shown to have unambiguous empirical substance.

Katz-Gerro also raises the question of dislikes. In fact, our survey collected some of the best quantitative data ever on dislikes, but without fulfilling the expectation that they would be exceptionally revealing. They provide little evidence of mutual or reciprocal cultural hostility between social groups.

I agree with Katz-Gerro that it makes sense to consider a wide-range of cultural practices – though perhaps not quite all those she lists. This makes it all the more unsatisfactory to relate all preferences to the dimension legitimacy. In addition, we should recognise several social axes of taste: class remains important, but it is one among several social divisions which differentiate cultural taste. In these respects my account moves away from Bourdieu's. Indeed, the crucial issue is how relatively easy access for more people to more, more varied, and more commercially-sourced cultural products has affected the process of social classification and segmentation.

To conclude, taste certainly reflects social position. In my opinion, across the cultural field as a whole, social class is probably less thoroughly pervasive than it was in Britain fifty years ago; now the effects of class are approached in strength by those of gender, ethnicity, and generation. Taste still serves the powerful well, largely through its role as a nexus of sociable interaction and inter-personal relationships. Command of high culture remains important in the internal integration of the elite and the professional-executive class, but it does very little directly to intimidate, exclude or subordinate the rest, and nor is it the only medium of distinction. However, more research is necessary – especially comparative research, network analysis and institutional analysis – to elaborate on the ways in which distinction is derived from cultural consumption.

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**Abstract:** This reply concerns the nature and change in the forms in which cultural capital operates in the process of distinction. It suggests that legitimate culture is not as central as Bourdieu described in France and that this has ramifications for theoretical understandings of social conflict over taste. It reviews some outstanding topics for research and presents some additional findings from the *Cultural Capital and Social Exclusion* project.

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**Keywords:** Bourdieu, class, cultural consumption, distinction, UK.

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**Alan Warde** is Professor of Sociology at the University of Manchester, UK. He has recently been working on the project *Cultural Capital and Social Exclusion* which examines patterns of cultural taste and participation in the UK. Written with colleagues on the project – Tony Bennett, Mike Savage Elizabeth Silva, David Wright and Modesto Gayo-Cal – a book, *Culture, Capital, Distinction*, will be published by Routledge in early 2009. He has also worked extensively on the sociology of consumption, often with reference to food. Publications include: *Consumption, Food and Taste: culinary antinomies and commodity culture*, (Sage, 1997); *Eating Out: social differentiation, consumption and pleasure*, (Cambridge University Press, 2000) with Lydia Martens; and *Trust in Food: an institutional and comparative analysis*, (Palgrave, 2007) with Unni Kjaernes and Mark Harvey.