

1 *Social status and cultural consumption*

TAK WING CHAN AND JOHN H. GOLDTHORPE

The research project on which this volume reports was conceived with two main aims in mind. The first and most immediate aim was to extend our knowledge of the social stratification of cultural consumption, and to do so in a cross-national perspective. In this regard, we obviously looked to build on previous research in this area, which has in fact been steadily growing in volume over recent decades. At the same time, though, it appeared to us that in certain respects this research was subject to limitations, especially in its treatment of social stratification, both conceptually and, in turn, operationally. As a result, the large potential that such research offers for increasing our more general understanding of the form of stratification of present-day societies was not being fully realised. The second aim of our project was therefore to bring research on the social stratification of cultural consumption into a somewhat closer relationship with mainstream stratification research, and in the hope that a better appreciation might thus be gained, on the one hand, of how social inequalities in cultural consumption actually arise and are sustained and, on the other hand, of what these inequalities reveal about the larger structures of social advantage and disadvantage of which they form part.¹

In this introductory chapter, we first of all outline a number of arguments concerning the social stratification of cultural consumption that have emerged from previous research and theory, and seek to provide some evaluation of their present standing. We also pose, in each case, a number of questions that arise and call for further investigation. In the second section of the chapter, we turn to our criticisms of the treatment of social stratification in previous work, and introduce the alternative and, we believe, more conceptually and empirically adequate approach

¹ Most participants in the project have a background in social stratification research and a shared history of participation in the activities of the International Sociological Association Research Committee 28 on Social Stratification and Mobility.

that we wish to follow, and that turns on the Weberian distinction between *class* and *status*. This section thus indicates the motivation for the development of the status scales that are described in detail in Chapter 2. In the third section, we then take up a number of other methodological issues that relate to the kinds of data that have been typically exploited and the analytical techniques that have been typically applied in the course of the project, and also to our comparative ambitions and strategies. And finally, in the fourth section, we briefly introduce each of the national contributions that make up Chapters 3 to 8, and point out features of particular interest. Our assessment of the main empirical findings of the project and of their theoretical implications, as viewed in comparative perspective, we reserve for the concluding chapter of the volume.

1.1 Previous research and theoretical argument

Research by sociologists into the social stratification of cultural consumption has been in large part prompted by wide-ranging debates on cultural change that have been recurrent in Western societies in the course of the twentieth century. Central to these debates are concerns over the apparent divergence of ‘highbrow’ and ‘lowbrow’ culture, the growing importance of the mass media, and the rise of commercialised, ‘mass’ culture.² Sociologists have sought to intervene in two main ways. They have engaged in research to increase the body of empirical evidence on the nature and extent of differences in cultural tastes and consumption across social strata; and they have tried to provide some theoretical explanation and understanding of the inter-relations that can thus be shown to exist between cultural and social hierarchies.

² Contributions to these debates – from widely differing socio-political standpoints – that had evident influence on sociologists include F. R. Leavis (1930), Q. Leavis (1932), Benjamin (1936), Horkheimer and Adorno (1972), Eliot (1948) and MacDonald (1957). It may be added here that in their work in the area in question sociologists have in the main followed authors such as the above in understanding ‘culture’ not in the wider anthropological sense of the term but rather in the narrower sense of, to quote a recent formulation by Gans (1999, p. 5), ‘the practices, goods and ideas classified broadly under the arts (including literature, music, architecture and design etc., and the products of all other print media, electronic media, etc.) whether used for education and aesthetic and spiritual enlightenment or for entertainment and diversion’. We accept a similar understanding in this collection.

For example, in a relatively early but still often cited study, Herbert Gans (1974) presents a range of research findings in support of the view that ‘highbrow’, ‘lowbrow’ and also versions of ‘middlebrow’ cultural taste and consumption do in fact rather systematically map onto the ‘socio-economic’ stratification of American society. Culture, that is to say, has to be seen as stratified rather than ‘massified’. And, correspondingly, Gans rejects more critical, ‘elitist’, accounts that would represent all other than highbrow culture as mass culture, and as the product simply of commercial greed and public ignorance. In his view, a number of ‘taste cultures’ have to be recognised, each of which embodies differing aesthetic values and standards that can be understood as having, so to speak, functional equivalence as responses to the differing wants and resources, material and symbolic, of individuals in socially more or less advantaged positions. Thus, in this perspective, all taste cultures are to be regarded as being, at least potentially, of equal worth and validity: that is, as being equally appropriate to the social contexts within which they are formed and expressed.

Gans’s work can then be taken as providing one of the leading examples of what we would label as ‘homology’ arguments: that is, arguments to the effect that a close correspondence exists between social and cultural stratification, and one that is created and maintained by certain identifiable processes. Homology arguments, in one version or another, could in fact be regarded as representing the orthodoxy in the field for some twenty years or more after Gans wrote. And it may be noted that in a second, updated edition of his book, Gans (1999) reasserts its central theses with only rather minor modifications.

However, during the period in question, a new, far more ambitious and generally more influential form of the homology argument was elaborated in the work of Pierre Bourdieu (see esp. Bourdieu, 1984). For Bourdieu, the correspondence that prevails between social and cultural stratification is yet more strongly determined than that envisaged by Gans and has also a much larger significance. Social classes display different patterns of cultural taste and consumption – and also of distaste and aversion – as part of their characteristic lifestyles, along with closely related patterns of material consumption as, for example, in food and dress. The internal consistency or ‘semantic unity’ of these lifestyles, and likewise their sharp demarcation across classes, is the product and expression of the *habitus* of individual class members: that is, of the socially constituted ‘system of dispositions’ that

they acquire in early life, that exerts a quite pervasive influence on their perceptions and practices, and that reflects the possibilities and exigencies that are created by particular ‘class conditions’.³

Further, though, in Bourdieu’s analysis, far more is here involved than cultural differentiation alone. The cultural field, he insists, no less than the economic field, is one in which class competition and conflict are always present. The ‘dominant classes’ of modern societies use their superior ‘cultural capital’, no less than their superior economic capital, in order to maintain their position of dominance. Differentiation inevitably serves as a means of underwriting hierarchy. More specifically, members of dominant classes seek to demonstrate and confirm the superiority of their own lifestyle over those of other classes by arrogating to it cultural forms that they can represent as ‘canonical’, ‘legitimate’ or otherwise ‘distinguished’ – while maintaining ‘aesthetic distance’ from other forms deemed to be inferior. Through such ‘symbolic violence’, as exerted, in particular, within the educational system but also more generally in public life, cultural capital can in fact be converted into economic capital, and cultural reproduction thus serves as a crucial component in social reproduction more generally.

Largely under the influence of Bourdieu, sociological thinking about the relationship of social and cultural stratification did then tend to be dominated by notions of homology at least up to the 1990s. At this time, though, Bourdieu’s work began to attract a greater amount of sceptical commentary, especially American, and this can now be seen as opening the way for the more radical criticism and the alternative theoretical approaches that subsequently emerged.

One focus of scepticism was on the extent to which Bourdieu’s analyses could be generalised from the French – or even perhaps from the Parisian – case.⁴ Thus, several authors (e.g. Lamont and Lareau, 1988; Lamont, 1992; Halle, 1993; Erickson, 1996) observed that, at least in North America, members of higher social strata were not obviously distinguished by their refined aesthetic tastes and their levels

³ The use of the term ‘homology’ to refer to this form of correspondence between social and cultural stratification would appear in fact to originate with Bourdieu (see e.g. Bourdieu, 1984, pp. 175–177).

⁴ The surveys that provided most of the empirical material used by Bourdieu (1984) dated from the 1960s and were not based on samples of any well-defined population. Parisians were in fact heavily over-represented as compared to ‘provincials’ (as also were members of higher as compared to lower social strata).

of participation in high cultural activities; and that the nature and extent of their cultural consumption was often not regarded, either by themselves or by others, as playing any great part in the maintenance of their social superiority.

Further, though, there were doubts as to whether *in general* the pursuit of cultural exclusiveness could be regarded as a characteristic feature of the lifestyles of dominant classes. In the course of earlier debates on mass culture, researchers such as Wilensky (1964) had already produced evidence to show that participation in such culture – via TV, newspapers, magazines etc. – was in fact quite extensive across *all* strata of American society; and also that while the small minority who did effectively ‘insulate’ themselves from mass – or popular – culture tended to be of high status, they in no way constituted a dominant elite. They were, rather, a marginalised group, ‘generally estranged from the major power centres in the United States’ (Wilensky, 1964, p. 194; and for Great Britain, cf. Abrams, 1958). Thus, in the 1990s attention was drawn back to this work and at the same time to that of commentators such as Shils (1972) and Bell (1976), who, pre-Bourdieu, had been more concerned to stress the diversity than the uniformity of lifestyles and cultural orientations among higher social strata and, more generally, the lack – and perhaps the growing lack – of correspondence in modern societies between social and cultural hierarchies.

In this context, new approaches to the understanding of the interrelation of cultural consumption and social stratification were thus encouraged, and homology arguments became challenged by rival arguments of at least two main kinds.

The first of these we would label as ‘individualisation’ arguments. Such arguments have a rather close affinity with more general claims of the decay or even ‘death’ of social class that became common in the later twentieth century. Authors such as Beck (1992) or Giddens (1991) maintain that the societies of ‘high’ or ‘late’ modernity are characterised by an accelerating process of the ‘individualisation of social inequality’. In many respects, these authors would accept that structures of inequality display a remarkable stability over time. None the less, they believe, class – and status – have declining influences on social action and, above all, on the formation of lifestyles and of the patterns of consumption, material and cultural, through which they are expressed. In these respects, class no longer provides an adequate

'context of orientation' and status-based social milieux 'lose their lustre' (Beck, 1992, pp. 88–89). Rather, rising standards of living, greater geographical and social mobility and exogamy, and a growing awareness of alternative social bases of identity – for example, gender, ethnicity or sexuality – all help to free individuals from class constraints and status preoccupations and allow them to develop their own lifestyles as a matter of personal choice and so as to give expression 'to a particular narrative of self-identity'. Indeed, not only do individuals increasingly choose their own lifestyles but they are increasingly *forced* to do so. They have no choice but to choose, and, moreover, since lifestyles are now followed 'reflexively', they are always open to revision and change 'in the light of the mobile nature of self-identity' (Giddens, 1991, pp. 80–81).

What is then implied is that any homology between social and cultural hierarchies that may have existed in the past – in more 'traditional' forms of society – is now in dissolution. No expectation can be maintained that different patterns of cultural consumption will stand in some systematic relationship to structures of social inequality. The processes that once created and sustained such a relationship – processes of socialisation into distinctive class beliefs, values and practices – have lost their force. In Warde's apt phrase (1997, p. 8), the emphasis shifts dramatically 'from *habitus* to freedom'. Indeed, in more extreme individualisation arguments, such as those advanced by Bauman (1988, 2002), consumption at large becomes celebrated as 'the focus and playground for individual freedom'. And further, in striking contrast to the position taken up by Bourdieu, consumption, in its symbolic aspects especially, is seen not as a field in which social hierarchy is asserted and reproduced but, rather, as one in which a greater proportion of the population than ever before can now engage in 'self-assertion' and without facing 'the danger of imminent and conclusive defeat'. New 'patterns of success' open up for the achievement of symbolic distinction through consumer rivalry and 'taste contests' that can be pursued 'not just in ideologically induced fantasies but in practical life, by the *majority* in capitalist societies' (Bauman, 1988, pp. 58–61).⁵

⁵ Rather remarkably, in his several references to Bourdieu, Bauman appears not to appreciate how radically their views diverge.

However, while individualisation arguments thus call homology arguments directly into question, their influence on sociologists with research interests in the field of cultural consumption would appear, so far at least, to be rather limited. Two reasons for this can be suggested. First, individualisation arguments are concerned with consumption in general, and although clearly intended to apply to its cultural no less than to its material aspects, the former have not received any special attention. Second, individualisation arguments cannot themselves claim any strong research basis. Their leading proponents are ‘social theorists’, writing in a largely data-free mode. Thus, while individualisation arguments have been discussed a good deal in both sociological and wider intellectual circles, they could scarcely be regarded as empirically compelling.

From this point of view, then, the second main challenge that has been raised to homology arguments is of a quite contrasting kind. This comes in the form of arguments that are specifically concerned with cultural consumption *and* that are grounded in by now quite extensive social research – that is, what we label as ‘omnivore–univore’ arguments. As already noted, the work of Wilensky and others in the 1960s revealed that members of higher social strata did not in the main have any aversion to popular culture and were indeed fairly regular consumers of it – together, perhaps, with various kinds of high culture. In the 1990s new research, notably by Richard Peterson and his associates (see esp. Peterson, 1992; Peterson and Simkus, 1992; Peterson and Kern, 1996) led to what were in effect developments of insights that this earlier work provided but that had been largely neglected while homology arguments remained to the fore.

These developments, in the form of omnivore–univore arguments, derive, like individualisation arguments, from the idea that a close mapping of cultural onto social hierarchies no longer exists. But rather than claiming that cultural consumption is now free of *any* systematic relationship with social stratification, proponents of omnivore–univore arguments see a new relationship as having emerged. In present-day societies, they would maintain, members of higher social strata, apart perhaps from a very small minority, do not shun popular or lowbrow culture but, as Wilensky observed, they regularly participate in it; and indeed, if anything, do so yet more actively than members of lower strata. However, a significant difference remains in the consumption

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-19446-4 - Social Status and Cultural Consumption

Edited by Tak Wing Chan

Excerpt

[More information](#)

of high or more ‘distinguished’ cultural forms. Such consumption is in fact largely confined to higher social strata – even if being less typical than homology arguments would suggest – while in lower strata consumption tends not to extend beyond more popular forms. In other words, the cultural consumption of individuals in more advantaged social positions differs from that of individuals in less advantaged positions in being both greater *and* wider in its range. It comprises not only more highbrow culture but more middlebrow and lowbrow culture *as well*. The crucial contrast that is created is not then that of ‘snob versus slob’ but rather that of cultural omnivore versus cultural univore (Peterson, 1992, p. 252).

Since being first advanced, omnivore–univore arguments have in fact aroused wide interest. A good deal of further research, following on from that of Peterson, has been stimulated in a range of modern societies, and with results that have been broadly, if not always entirely, supportive (see e.g. Bryson, 1996, 1997; van Eijck, 2001; López-Sintas and García-Álvarez, 2002, 2004; Coulangeon, 2003; López-Sintas and Katz-Gerro, 2005; van Eijck and Knulst, 2005; Chan and Goldthorpe, 2005, 2007d,e). However, various questions have emerged concerning how exactly omnivore–univore arguments are to be understood and, in particular, concerning the meaning and significance that might best be attached to the idea of cultural omnivorousness and to research findings that document its prevalence among higher social strata.

It has, for example, been observed (see e.g. Sullivan and Katz-Gerro, 2007; Coulangeon and Lemel, 2007) that two different understandings of cultural omnivorousness are possible. It could be taken to refer either to a general cultural ‘voraciousness’, in the sense of a large appetite for *all* forms of cultural consumption, or, more specifically, to a tendency towards ‘taste eclecticism’ that finds expression in patterns of cultural consumption that cut across established categories of ‘high’ and ‘low’. In fact, in his early work Peterson himself is quite explicit on this issue: omnivorousness does *not* – or not necessarily – imply a tendency to like everything in a quite indiscriminating way. Rather, what it signifies is simply ‘an *openness* to appreciating everything’, from which particular tastes and consumption may or may not develop, and is thus primarily to be contrasted with cultural tastes and consumption that are ‘based on rigid rules of exclusion’ (Peterson and Kern, 1996, p. 904; cf also Peterson, 2005).

Following from this interpretation of omnivorousness, however, it has further been asked whether, insofar as cultural omnivores do display such openness and a consequent disregard for supposed hierarchies of taste, their presence is not largely consistent with individualisation arguments. Omnivore cultural consumption, it has been suggested, may be concerned more with individual self-realisation than with setting down social markers and creating social distinction (see e.g. Wynne and O'Connor, 1998). But it may be noted that Peterson is here again quite unambiguous, at least in the original statement of his position. While omnivorousness should be understood as antithetical to cultural exclusiveness and 'aesthetic distancing', it 'does not imply an indifference to distinctions', and indeed the rise of the cultural omnivore 'may suggest the formulation of new rules governing symbolic boundaries' (Peterson and Kern, 1996, p. 904). In other words, omnivores may be seen as embracing a new aesthetic which, even if more inclusive, democratic and relativist than that which earlier prevailed, can still serve to express cultural *and* social superiority, and especially when set against the far more restricted cultural tastes and consumption of univores (cf. López-Sintas and García-Álvarez, 2002). Furthermore, omnivores may still show discrimination either in the uses that they make of mass or popular culture – for example, through ironic or otherwise condescending uses; or in still rejecting *some* of its particular forms – 'anything but heavy metal' (Bryson, 1996).⁶

Omnivore–univore arguments can then be seen as posing a challenge to homology and to individualisation arguments alike. On the one hand, the idea of a simple matching of social and cultural hierarchies is called into question, as in turn are Bourdieusian claims that cultural taste and consumption closely reflect 'class conditions', via

⁶ What has, however, to be recognised is that further uncertainty has more recently been created in regard to omnivore–univore arguments as a result of an elaboration suggested by Peterson himself. In recognition of the fact that a very small minority may still be found within higher social strata who do reject popular culture, Peterson (2005) now suggests that this minority should be categorised as 'highbrow univores' in contrast with the more typical 'highbrow omnivores'; and that, correspondingly, 'lowbrow univores' and 'lowbrow omnivores' should also be distinguished. We are ourselves very doubtful about the value of this move. There would seem to be a danger of losing the crucial connotation of omnivorousness as entailing cultural consumption that is relatively wide-ranging in *its extension across*, rather than merely in *its expression within*, generally recognised taste levels.

the mediation of distinctive and exigent forms of *habitus*, and that cultural exclusiveness represents the main form of ‘symbolic violence’ through which cultural reproduction promotes social reproduction. On the other hand, while over-socialised conceptions of the actor are thus rejected, so too are ideas of cultural consumption as now essentially reflecting no more than the highly personalised choices and self-identity projects that individuals pursue, and in a way that is free of constraints imposed by, and of motivations grounded in, the positions that they hold within structures of social inequality.

It is, then, against the background of the research and theory outlined above that the papers brought together in this volume have been written. A range of questions remain open and are, directly or indirectly, addressed. Have ideas of a homology between social and cultural hierarchies and of cultural exclusiveness serving social reproduction now to be generally abandoned – or may there be some particular societal contexts in which they still apply? Have individualisation arguments been too much neglected, or at least should not more recognition be given to the possibility that in modern societies the relationship between social and cultural stratification has become relatively weak, whatever form it may take? Conversely, even if this relationship, whatever its strength, is now better treated in terms of an omnivore–univore rather than an elite–mass distinction, in which of their possible interpretations do omnivore–univore arguments find most empirical support? And, in any event, may not patterns of cultural consumption and types of consumer be found, at least in particular cultural domains or under particular national conditions, that are not readily characterised in omnivore–univore terms?

We turn next to the approaches and strategies that will be followed in taking up these and related issues, and in regard, first of all, to social stratification.

1.2 The treatment of social stratification: class and status

As we have already remarked, we would see the main weakness of earlier research into the social stratification of cultural consumption as resulting from inadequacies in the way in which stratification has been conceptualised and, in turn, treated in empirical analyses. The source of these inadequacies, we would argue, is a failure to maintain the