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Introduction

To say that 'there is no accounting for tastes' is usually a way of expressing an easy-going tolerance for the 'strange' tastes of other people. It can also, however, be a way of suggesting that tastes are so individual and idiosyncratic as to be unaccountable in the sense of being beyond the reach of reasoned understanding. We start out, in this book, from the premise that this is not so. Indeed, our main purpose is to show how the tastes that are evident in the cultural choices and preferences of contemporary Australians are pre-eminently social in their organisation and character. Our likes and dislikes have a definite pattern, one which emerges from the roles played by social class, age, gender, education, and ethnicity in distributing cultural interests and abilities differentially across the population. We also argue that the social pattern of cultural tastes in contemporary Australia is enmeshed within complexly interacting forms of social and cultural power by means of which differences in cultural preference are used as markers of social position and, in some circumstances, as a way of unequally distributing cultural life-chances.

The main basis for our arguments on these matters is the statistical evidence provided by a national survey of the cultural practices and preferences of 2756 adult Australians that we conducted in late 1994/early 1995. We had three main aims in view in designing the *Australian Everyday Cultures* survey. First, in order to map as comprehensively as possible a range of cultural practices, we asked questions about everything we could think of that counted as 'culture', including home-based leisure activities, fashion, the ownership of cars and electronic equipment, eating habits, friendships, holidays, outdoor activities, gambling, sport, reading, artistic pursuits, watching

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television, cinema-going, and the use of libraries, museums and art galleries. Second, as a way of understanding the principles underlying particular patterns of cultural activity and their accompanying likes and dislikes, we asked some questions designed to explore attitudes to aesthetic and cultural matters – views about art and suitable objects for photography, for example. Third, we explored the social backgrounds of our respondents in considerable detail, asking about their educational histories, occupations, incomes, place of residence, religion, political affiliations and views, gender, and ethnicity – as well as related questions concerning their parents' backgrounds and their plans for their children. Our purpose here was to provide the means of mapping the social backgrounds of our respondents in as much detail as their cultural tastes and interests so that, by correlating the two, we might produce a richly textured *social* cartography of cultural tastes.

This survey (reproduced as Appendix 2) is not the only basis of our discussion in what follows. As a prelude to the national survey, we carried out a pilot study centred on Brisbane and its neighbouring postal districts. Administered in late 1993, the questions we asked in this initial survey owed a good deal to a dozen or so focus-group discussions we organised earlier that year to find out at first hand the main cultural interests and involvements of Australians from different social backgrounds. We then, in late 1996 through into early 1997, conducted home-based interviews with 34 of the respondents who filled in the *Australian Everyday Cultures* survey. As with the membership of our earlier focus groups, our purpose, in deciding who to interview, was to encompass a range of different social backgrounds aiming for a rough balance of men and women, a range of ages and class positions, varying levels of educational achievement as well as a diversity of locations including rural contexts, provincial cities, two capital cities (Brisbane and Sydney) and their immediate environs. The resulting oral testimony of the cultural interests and activities of specific individuals and, as often as not, their families is a resource we draw on frequently to help make sense of the statistical patterns arising out of the *Australian Everyday Cultures* survey and to give a more vivid sense of the lived texture of the cultural practices underlying the more abstract and disembodied nature of our statistical findings.

Some of the particular areas of cultural activity we consider have been examined in earlier studies – some of them academic, others prepared for or by organisations like the Australia Council or the National Culture/Leisure Statistics Unit of the Australian Bureau of Statistics. What hasn't been attempted before, however, is a study of the *relationships* between the patterns of participation in the different fields of cultural practice that we encompass in this study. We have therefore, in designing this book, aimed to look in close detail at the main fields of cultural practice that our survey encompasses as well as considering the similarities and differences between them.

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We start by taking our theoretical bearings from the work of the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu whose *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* has been our main source of inspiration and, like all sources of inspiration, our main object of critique too. In chapter 1, we accordingly indicate what we have taken from the work of Bourdieu, especially his account of the role played by particular kinds of cultural skill – what Bourdieu calls 'cultural capital' – in organising social distinctions, and where we have judged it necessary to part company with him on either theoretical grounds or – taking account of the differences between Australia in the 1990s and France in the 1960s – empirical ones. We also discuss the respects in which our study has been shaped by the perspectives of cultural studies and the issues that are posed by work situated on the interdisciplinary borderlands between sociology and cultural studies. These include a consideration of what cultural studies has to gain from the quantitative research methods of sociology and an appreciation of the dangers which attend such methods unless their use is accompanied by a self-reflexive awareness of the constructive role they play within the research process in organising their objects of study into being. We conclude this chapter by briefly reviewing the main demographic characteristics of the sample for the *Australian Everyday Cultures* survey.

In chapter 2, our concerns are, loosely speaking, ethnographic as we consider the light our interview material throws on the social factors informing the cultural choices that individuals make in and about the house. In looking closely at what men and women from a range of different class and educational backgrounds tell us about their home-based leisure activities, their preferences in furnishings and decoration, their preferred styles of entertaining, and their collections of paintings, china or books, we show how these can be related to their socially rooted experiences and aspirations. We then locate these individual preferences and activities in a broader context by showing how, in statistical terms, attitudes towards the home and participation in home-based activities are profoundly differentiated in terms of gender, class, and education.

Chapter 3 also focuses on the home, but from a different perspective; we concentrate on the patterns of ownership of the range of media and communications technologies that are typically found in the home: telephone, television, radio, VCRs, personal computers, CDs, and so on. We also look at the uses to which these different technologies are put, and how these uses vary in accordance with gender, place of residence, class, and the age composition of households. In moving on to consider the television-viewing, radio-listening and – moving outside the home – cinema-going activities and preferences of our sample, we lend support to the now considerable body of evidence stressing the widely varied ways in which media are used by men and women, by different age groups, and by the members of different social classes.

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The home, of course, is often defined in opposition to places of work. Culture, too, especially in its close association with the concept of leisure, is often separated from the world of work. In chapter 4, we counter the impression that work is a 'culture-free' zone by showing that work has its own cultures and that these are closely connected with all other aspects of cultural life. In doing so we consider the respects in which involvement in work of various kinds (full-time, part-time; employed, self-employed) and the positions that individuals occupy in work-based relations of power and authority and in the varied cultures of work are affected by a historically distinctive division of labour in which the effects of gender, class, education, region and ethnicity are prominent. We also show how these relations to work spill over into other aspects of cultural life, including cultures of friendship for example. This leads to a discussion of leisure activities associated with a range of contexts outside the home – going to the theatre, musicals, pubs or clubs; holidays; camping and bush-walking; and gambling, in all its forms – and the tendency for participation in these to be sharply polarised along the lines of conventional 'high'/'popular' distinctions.

The salience of such distinctions is a matter that we return to at various points in later chapters. They are taken into account when we consider, in chapter 5, the part played by different forms of diet, exercise and sport in organising distinctive relationships to the body – ways of working on and with the body that are, at the same time, ways of shaping a distinctive self. Our interest in these matters has to do with the role of such practices of the body in the processes of gendering, racialisation and classing through which we are formed as particular kinds of persons. Again, our evidence suggests that the roles which practices of the body play in relation to processes of person formation are closely bound up with distinctive hierarchies of body cultures articulated, in complex ways, with relations of class, gender, and ethnicity.

The concerns of chapter 6 centre on the social organisation of reading practices, including how much people read, the kinds of reading (books, magazines, and newspapers) they prefer, their favourite authors, the books they buy, and so forth. Gender proves to be the most significantly differentiating factor here. Although there is a good deal of shared ground between women's and men's reading, other aspects of their reading are markedly polarised into what are virtually entirely separate feminised and masculinised domains. Our interests in this chapter focus on the relationships between this gendered organisation of reading practices and conventional hierarchies of literary value. While women's preferences are often for genres which are held in low esteem, it is also true that women are much more likely than men – who prefer scientific and factual genres – to read canonical literary works. This picture is complicated, however, when the effects of class are taken into account.

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Chapter 7 looks at music, where differences of taste have served as an unusually sensitive measure of the relations between 'high' and 'low' culture and of the role which such relations play in distinguishing different social classes from each other. How far is this true in Australia? To answer this question, we look at the evidence regarding our respondents' musical likes and dislikes as represented by their favourite and least-favourite musical genres, performers and composers. We also look at the evidence we gathered about musical knowledge and the extent to which this varies with social position. This proves important in assessing those arguments which contend that musical tastes, rather than reflecting a distinction between 'elite' and 'mass' taste cultures, correspond to a division between cultural 'omnivores' and 'univores': that is, between the wide-ranging and inclusive tastes of those with high levels of education and the more restricted tastes of less-educated groups. We argue that such views, although not without merit, fail to distinguish properly between the distribution of knowledge about music and the distribution of musical likes and dislikes. On the larger question the chapter addresses, however, we conclude that music does indeed remain one of the most sensitive measures of cultural capital and of its relationships to class.

One of our strongest reservations regarding Bourdieu's *Distinction* concerns its insularity in discussing French culture as a hermetically closed system. In view of the degree to which, historically, Australian culture has been shaped by the cultural flows of different phases of European and Asian migration, this has never been a viable option here. It is even less so today when the boundaries between different national cultures are becoming more porous as a result of increasingly globalised patterns of cultural production and distribution. How do these factors affect the cultural interests and preferences of Australians? This is the central question guiding our discussion in chapter 8 where we take another look at our evidence relating to film, television and music preferences, but from the perspective of considering the extent to which age affects an interest in Australian compared with American materials. The conclusions we draw are mixed. Young people are the most likely to prefer American music and television over Australian material, yet – and it is here that we are critical of simplified accounts of globalisation as 'media imperialism' – this does not seem to imperil young Australians' sense of their national identity. Equally, when viewed in the light of the strong government support the Australian film industry has enjoyed since the 1970s, the strong interest of young Australians in Australian films suggests the positive role that cultural industry policies can play in building national audiences.

Policy questions are to the fore of our concerns in chapter 9. Written at a time when the role that governments should play in supporting cultural activities is very much in question, this chapter examines the extent to which

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government support for cultural activities increases their accessibility to a broad cross-section of the population. This involves a consideration of the composition of the audiences for public broadcasting, for the institutions of public culture (museums, libraries, art galleries), and for publicly subsidised cultural forms – opera and the theatre, for example. These are considered in relation to the operation of private cultural markets. Our findings suggest that, while there is little doubt that public broadcasting and the institutions of public culture do not recruit their audiences evenly from across all sections of the population, they are more successful in this respect than are private cultural markets or the 'flagship' institutions of theatre, opera, and the like which operate on a hybrid public/private funding basis. We accordingly argue that current tendencies leading towards the increased privatisation of both culture and education are likely to result in a more unequal distribution of cultural life-chances – or opportunities to participate in cultural life – than is at present the case.

We return, in chapter 10, to the questions from which we take our initial bearings in chapter 1: how are relations of class and culture organised in Australia? how do these intersect with relations of gender, age, ethnicity, and culture? what are the connections between these forms of cultural power and the exercise of social power? In order to answer these questions, we first draw together a series of summary profiles of the different demographic groups discussed in the earlier chapters, paying particular attention to age cohorts, genders, and social classes. In looking at the specific configurations of these variables that are evident in different fields of cultural practice, we argue that they do not give rise to a simple 'high'/'popular' dichotomisation of cultural practices that can be mapped on to relations of social power in a singular fashion. The result, rather, is a number of competing cultural dichotomisations articulated to different social divisions, suggesting a relatively plural and diffused set of connections between the social and cultural forms in which power is organised and exercised.

We have, then, cast our net widely in mapping the distribution of Australian cultural practices. Inevitably, though, there are significant aspects of Australian cultural life that we have not been able to include in our statistical portrait. We are aware, in retrospect, of many other questions we could usefully have asked in the *Australian Everyday Cultures* survey, and of some that we should have asked. Our discussion of class, for example, would have benefited if we had asked about the ownership of shares and other assets. That said, it is notoriously difficult to obtain statistically reliable information about the cultural practices of the richest and most economically powerful classes, and we remain unsure whether asking questions of this kind would have thrown much light on the cultural preferences of the high bourgeoisie who, in our study as in most forms of social inquiry, remain more or less invisible. We should have liked, too, to have explored the sexualities and

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sexual practices of our respondents in view of their evident cultural significance in their own right and in their implications for other areas of cultural choice and practice. It was clear, however, that including questions on these matters would have significantly affected the response rates and the validity of our findings. Some important voices are also missing from the interviews we conducted. These would have been more representative had we worked harder to ensure that an adequate complement of 18 to 25 year olds was included in the interview sample.

No doubt there are other shortcomings, but we leave these for our readers to identify. Whatever the merits of our findings, however, we have, in working together on this project, become strongly convinced of the need for debates concerned with questions of cultural theory, policy and practice to be conducted in relation to the kinds of empirical evidence we have gathered during this inquiry. We have found the different methods we have used enormously fruitful in giving us a detailed sense of the richness and complexity of people's cultural activities, and we hope this book conveys something of the fascination and pleasure we have found in thinking and writing about them.

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Chapter 1

Theorising Cultures

Culture and Classification

The American sociologist Howard Becker once wrote that 'people do not experience their aesthetic beliefs as merely arbitrary and conventional; they feel that they are natural, proper and moral'.[1] That feeling is at the heart of the phenomenon that this book explores: the making of cultural choices, in every dimension of daily life, which differ in relatively systematic ways according to the kind of person you are – or rather the *kinds* of person, because these differences occur along a number of different axes of social being. We all have a sense that these choices – preferring yum cha to McDonald's, or living in the city rather than living in the suburbs, or wearing silver instead of gold, or listening to Bach rather than Wagner or Pearl Jam rather than Elton John – are significant; they go to the core of who we are, and we are likely to feel that anyone who is blind enough to make the opposite choices is in some sense deficient or even downright strange.

Cultural choice positions us: it tells us and others who we are, and it defines for us and for others who we are not. It sorts us into 'kinds' of people. Although these kinds come to seem 'natural', they have everything to do with the organisation of the social. By this we mean, not that some ineluctable force channels us into the taste-cultures that 'correspond' to the different modes of our social being, or that a mysterious logic matches up our 'choices' with a social destiny, but rather that the sorting, the grouping, is done by us as we shape and elaborate a social place that is partly given and partly chosen in the open-ended formation of our lives. The choices are always constrained by the hard realities that structure life-chances, but culture is a matter of our formation of ourselves, under specific circumstances and in specific relations to others, as members of

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a group – indeed of a multiplicity of intersecting and overlapping groups.

These questions of cultural choice and practice have been central to those strands of sociology running from Thorstein Veblen and Max Weber (and, at a later time, from Erving Goffman) that have been concerned with how symbolic material is put to use in the processes of social differentiation; they have also been important issues in contemporary cultural studies. The model from which we have drawn our inspiration in this book is the work of Pierre Bourdieu, who has explored the social complexities of the French cultural system in a number of books over the last thirty years. In particular, we have closely followed the example of *Distinction*, first published in 1979 and translated into English in 1984, which remains the most ambitious and most comprehensive analysis of the social functions of taste, and which has developed the most rigorous theoretical vocabulary currently available as a basis for this analysis.

Based on two major surveys, undertaken in 1963 and 1967–8, of a sample of 1217 people in Paris, Lille and a small provincial town, Bourdieu's research seeks to investigate in a systematic manner one of the most simple yet most fundamental questions about culture: how is it differentially distributed, and what statistical regularities can be observed in this distribution? This question supposes that the distribution is not random, and that its regularities will correspond to other dimensions of human activity and of social structure. It is a matter, that is to say, both of social differences, and of social differentiation; and it assumes that the meanings of culture have more to do with the uses to which it is put (uses that Bourdieu summarises in the word 'distinction') than with any intrinsic value of aesthetic and cultural materials. If culture distinguishes people and groups of people both in the sense of setting them apart and in the sense of raising some above others, it follows that it has to do not only with social difference but also with social inequality; the exercise of taste puts culture to the use of sorting out the distinguished from the vulgar, the socially 'high' from the socially 'low', across a potentially infinite number of scales.

In Bourdieu's model, the major dimension of social inequality involved in these uses of cultural materials is social class; class and culture form parallel and mutually overdetermining worlds. Erickson (1996: 217) summarises his position in this manner:

> class and culture are both vertically ranked in mutually reinforcing ways. The culture of the highest classes becomes the most distinguished culture, apparently because it is innately superior but really because it is the culture of those who rule. In its turn, culture is a class signal that helps to maintain class domination and to shape individual life chances, much as economic capital does.

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What is at stake in cultural choices, then, is not simply differences in taste but the ability of the dominant class to impose the value attributed to those differences, in such a way that some choices count as 'legitimate' and others lack legitimacy. Rather than obeying a purely aesthetic logic, aesthetic judgements transpose distinctions of class into distinctions of taste, and vice versa, and thereby strengthen the boundaries between classes. But they also assert the legitimacy of the dominance of the ruling class. Bourdieu argues this through an economic metaphor: competence in 'legitimate' cultural codes constitutes a 'cultural capital' which is unequally distributed among the social classes, although it has the appearance of an innate talent, a 'natural gift'.

The concept of cultural capital performs two complementary tasks. The first is to explain how advantages of birth or wealth are translated into social prestige by a displacement of these primary indicators of social power into partly autonomous systems of aesthetic and cultural values. The second is to elucidate the mechanisms by which patterns of social advantage are reproduced in and through the schooling system despite the fact that modern centralised state education systems were designed specifically to provide equality of opportunity for children of all classes. An alternative explanation would involve making the double assumption (a) that natural talent is the basis of social advantage, and (b) that talent or intelligence is genetically transmitted; but these assumptions hardly explain why it is, as Bourdieu and Passeron (1964: 12) put it, that – in the France of the time – a child of upper-class parents had 80 times the chance of entering tertiary education as the child of an agricultural labourer, 40 times that of the child of a worker, and twice that of the child of middle-class parents.

The notion of cultural capital is of course a metaphor. In his most precise treatment of the concept Bourdieu (1986: 241–2) defines capital as

> accumulated labour (in its materialised form or its 'incorporated,' embodied form) which, when appropriated on a private, i.e., exclusive basis by agents or groups of agents, enables them to appropriate social energy in the form of reified or living labour;

the distribution of capitals among individuals and classes determines 'the chances of success for practices'. By 'capital' Bourdieu does not, however, mean solely financial wealth; rather he distinguishes between three forms in which the crystallisation or reification of 'social energy' is manifested:

> as *economic capital*, which is immediately and directly convertible into money and may be institutionalised in the form of property rights; as *cultural capital*, which is convertible, on certain conditions, into economic capital and may be institutionalised in the

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