

A FASHIONABLE RECONSIDERATION OF CULTURAL CAPITAL

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In the United States today, the same styles of shoes are worn on the streets of East LA and through the corridors of Ivy League libraries. The same hip-hop tracks are played through the headphones of disadvantaged youths and on the MP3 players of Wall Street magnates. The contemporary culture of the United States is one of variation, ambiguity, and perpetual transformation. Today's cultural consumption patterns are vastly different from those existing thirty years ago, and cultural tastes are no longer clearly tied to social class.

These changing patterns call for a reconsideration of the theory of cultural capital and its relation to social stratification. If the distribution of particular cultural tastes is no longer patterned along class lines, is Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital still relevant? Is the idea of cultural capital useful in examining contemporary culture? Although we need to reconsider how we measure cultural capital, Bourdieu's theory maintains its relevance and demonstrates how powerful culture can be in perpetuating stratification, even in an age when the same fashion and music flows across class lines. Analyzing fashion as a case study, this paper argues that diversifying tastes lessen the importance of what individuals own, but increase the importance of cultural knowledge and understanding in maintaining privileged status. This perpetuates stratification by masking the true source of inequality.

THEORETICAL BASIS

In order to explain how cultural capital theory remains relevant, it is important to define the ideas central to it: objectified

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capital, embodied capital, and symbolic violence. Capital, be it cultural, economic, or social, is a resource from which people draw in order to advance or maintain their status in society. The idea of cultural capital holds cultural tastes, experiences, customs, and attitudes as a resource possessed by the dominant class in a society (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977). Although dominated classes also have cultural tastes, their tastes are not considered valuable by the dominant class and thus do not operate as capital.

Bourdieu distinguished between three different types of cultural capital: objectified, embodied, and institutional. Objectified capital consists of possession of or encounters with tangible cultural objects such as owning certain CDs, visiting certain museums, or attending certain performances. Embodied capital refers to the way culture is understood by an individual—that is, an individual’s familiarity with certain objects, attitudes toward them, and knowledge about them. Though a person can gain objectified capital if given the right CD or taken to the right museum, the transfer of embodied capital is not so simple. It must be fostered over time and ultimately reflected in the way a person thinks and speaks about cultural preferences. Bourdieu (1976: 193) described embodied capital as “[a] common code enabling all those possessing that code to attach the same meaning to the same words, the same types of behaviour and the same works.” If two people who listen to the same music attach different meanings to that music, associate it with different experiences, and relate it to different knowledge, then they have different levels of embodied capital. The third type of cultural capital, institutional, is a formal recognition of the possession of cultural capital through the acquisition of credentials, as in the academic degree system. Since institutionalized cultural capital does not relate to cultural consumption, it is not necessarily affected by changes in consumption patterns and will not be considered here.

Cultural capital does not hold any inherent value but instead gains power in society because of cultural perceptions through a process Bourdieu terms “symbolic violence.” The concept of symbolic violence holds that the value given to any cultural preference,

experience, or attitude is socially constructed. For instance, visiting the Metropolitan Museum of Art does not necessarily make someone a better person; it merely is assumed to do so by the dominant class in society. The process of symbolic violence draws boundaries between different groups based on their cultural consumption habits (DiMaggio 1992). Drawing distinctions based on these boundaries allows stratification to persist even within a discourse of equality. For example, school systems can maintain a discourse of equality of opportunity, while favoring those students who possess the right kind of cultural capital. When disadvantaged students fall behind, teachers and administrators attribute their failure to having the wrong interests and attitudes. When privileged students succeed, teachers and administrators view their success as a result of having appropriate interests and attitudes. Even though these interests and attitudes are strongly tied to social class, they are seen as inherent characteristics, leading educators to neglect the impact of social class on individual success. In this way, stratification persists without explicit acknowledgment. When society assumes that a form of capital holds inherent value, it is termed “legitimized.”

According to Bourdieu, embodied cultural capital proves more powerful than objectified capital in perpetuating stratification because, unlike possessing certain objects or engaging in particular cultural activities, attitudes and interests can be viewed as inherent characteristics of the individuals. In the example of the school system, a teacher can make an explicit effort to increase the objectified cultural capital of her disadvantaged students by taking them to museums, showing them classic works of art, or playing particular pieces of music in class. However, if the teacher rewards certain attitudes toward or comments about these experiences, privileged students will continue to seem more deserving of success because they possess embodied capital. Though objectified cultural capital is readily apparent and observable, embodied cultural capital holds greater potential to serve as a barrier to mobility since it is more difficult to acquire and mask as a form of capital. To date, this potential risk has been largely ignored in cultural capital research, which has focused overwhelmingly on objectified capital.

PAST RESEARCH ON CULTURAL CONTEXT

Cultural capital research focusing on objectified culture assumes a cultural climate in which the prestige of various cultural objects is organized hierarchically. Some tastes belong solely to the privileged classes, and others are unique to the disadvantaged. People's tastes affect their social status, regardless of the corresponding attitudes, ideas, and knowledge. The school system must value particular works, not just certain attitudes toward classic art. In the society envisioned by many cultural capital theorists, embodied capital is important, but objectified capital can serve as an easily measurable proxy for embodied capital because the two are similarly distributed. The dominant class has possession of both the legitimized set of objectified cultural consumables and a unique understanding of those objects—that is, it attaches a particular code of meaning to them, and they thereby possess embodied capital. There is no absolute association between the distribution of objectified and embodied cultural capital, but the distribution is patterned such that some types of legitimized objectified culture are widely associated with the privileged classes. Because of this distribution, measuring objectified cultural capital is assumed to measure embodied cultural capital; those who possess the valued objectified form are also likely to possess the valued embodied form.

Bourdieu also found a “close relationship linking cultural practices ... to social origin” and was able to classify particular tastes based on approximations of their legitimized social prestige (1984: 13–16). Examining his data from French society, Bourdieu concluded that it was “possible to isolate ... different coherent sets of [cultural] preferences” for different segments of the social hierarchy (262). The distribution of objectified cultural capital was patterned roughly along class lines.

Since the publication of *Distinction*, in which Bourdieu first presented his findings, researchers have tended to follow his empirical method, focusing on easily measured objectified culture. In one of the first American applications of the theory of cultural capital, DiMaggio operationalized cultural capital using survey data of stu-

dents' participation in such cultural activities as plays, concerts, and museums, as well as knowledge of certain cultural forms (1982). Although DiMaggio included self-reported attitudes, the lack of specificity in questions and responses prevented the study from exploring the complexities of embodied capital. In a more thorough examination, he again focused on specific cultural objects and experiences (DiMaggio and Mohr 1985). Following DiMaggio's work, Lareau and Weininger concluded that most researchers viewed cultural capital as certain prestigious cultural tastes and experiences or particular "highbrow status practices" (113–115). The most common measures have been trips to museums, theaters, galleries, or lectures, focusing on the visit itself rather than attitudes toward it, knowledge gained from it, or incorporation of understanding into later experiences (De Graaf, Ganzeboom, et al., Katsillis and Rubinson, Kalmijn and Kraaykamp, Aschaffenburg and Maas, Dumais, Eitle and Eitle). Other common measures include reading practices (De Graaf, Kalmijn and Kraaykamp, Aschaffenburg and Maas, Dumais) and children's private arts instruction (Aschaffenburg and Maas, Roscigno and Ainsworth-Darnell, Dumais, Eitle and Eitle); both assume inherent value in exposure to cultural objects and experiences without examining how they are embodied.

The practical difficulty of measuring embodied capital helps explain the focus on objectified capital in empirical research. Generally, objectified cultural capital can be evaluated with survey responses, physical observations, or standardized interview questions. Embodied culture, by contrast, is much less tangible. It is difficult to gather data on embodied cultural capital, and even if extensive qualitative research is performed, it is difficult to measure and compare different levels of embodied capital. It is easy to quantify the number of museums visited, CDs owned, or classic books read; the same cannot be said of attitudes regarding these objects and activities. When the distribution of legitimized objectified and embodied cultural capital is similar, as was the case for Bourdieu, objectified cultural capital can serve as an appropriate proxy for measuring embodied cultural capital. In a more complicated cultural climate, however, the distributions of objectified and embodied cultural

capital are not necessarily linearly related, so equating measures of objectified cultural familiarity with general cultural capital neglects the hugely important role of embodied capital. As the distribution of objectified cultural capital becomes less hierarchical, individual attitudes become increasingly important. As noted earlier, individuals at opposite ends of the socioeconomic spectrum now listen to the same music or wear the same shoes, making such considerations especially relevant in contemporary US society. As technology disseminates culture among different classes, globalization introduces new cultural objects, and cultural preferences permeate class boundaries, the relationship between objectified and embodied cultural capital requires theoretical reconsideration. By ignoring the importance of embodied capital, researchers further its power to perpetuate symbolic violence.

Lareau and Weininger focused their critique on this problem—the way in which cultural capital has been dealt with in existing literature. They suggest that, although Bourdieu's 1984 methodology was appropriate for the time and place he examined, other contexts need a new approach. Their analysis calls for a reconceptualization of the theory of cultural capital rather than its dismissal. Similarly, in a review of cultural capital literature, Douglas Holt urged a focus on “consumption practices rather than consumption objects” when considering cultural capital in the contemporary social world; he concluded that the way culture is consumed is more important than the actual materials consumed (Holt 1). These critiques suggest movement away from the past operationalizations of cultural capital and toward a more nuanced examination of underlying embodied capital. Though Lareau and Weininger focused their research on studies of the educational system, this paper applies their suggestion to a wider cultural context.

THE CHANGING CULTURAL CLIMATE

Contemporary culture in the United States is quite different from the social mores examined by early researchers. James Davis examined General Social Survey data in 1982 and found little sup-

port for distinct class cultures in the United States like those Bourdieu found in France in 1984 (Davis, J.). Though not all studies have rejected the idea of unique and objectified class cultures in the United States (Crane 2000: 2), much research supports the notion of increasingly diversified objectified cultural consumption patterns (Peterson and Simkus, Peterson and Kern, Seabrook). Today, preference for particular cultural objects is not always organized along a hierarchical scheme of valuation; instead, an immensely wide array of choices in every cultural form has led to a pluralistic cultural climate in which people's choices often have little correlation with their class backgrounds (Crane 1992: 58). Determining what forms of objectified cultural capital hold the most value is thus difficult if not impossible. Peterson and Simkus labeled this changing cultural scheme "omnivorousness" (1992: 169). They argue that while consuming high-status culture held value thirty years ago, the ability to appreciate a wide array of culture and express diverse tastes holds cultural value today.

The relationship between objectified and embodied cultural capital is much more complex than it has been historically. The privileged classes have appropriated many cultural objects created by traditionally subjugated groups. Museums like the Smithsonian have devoted entire displays to hip-hop culture and graffiti. A study of cultural capital focusing primarily on objectified culture would deem the theory of cultural capital inapplicable. What value is there in familiarity with a particular genre of music if that genre is widely consumed by many segments of society? In this type of cultural environment, the distributions of objectified and embodied cultural capital are no longer correlated. Objectified capital loses its meaning in many ways, and hence so do studies focusing solely on that type of capital. For example, though people of all walks of life consume hip-hop music, there is a distinct difference among attitudes toward it and venues for its consumption. Listening to music in a concert setting versus a dance club or even a museum reflects different notions of value with respect to the artistry, musicality, and social utility of the performance. The detached or even amused attitude of a museumgoer encountering hip-hop culture

for the first time reveals a stark attitudinal difference in comparison to the visceral enjoyment of a frequent clubgoer. In order to embark on a reconsideration of cultural capital, one must examine how the shifting distribution of objectified and embodied cultural capital has played out in actual cultural fields. To better understand how cultural capital functions in today's society, this paper considers fashion as a case study.

A CASE STUDY OF FASHION

The aggregate cultural climate is a complicated source from which to draw theoretical conclusions. To examine the separation of the distributions of the types of cultural capital and their potential for symbolic violence in contemporary culture, this analysis will focus on one particular subculture: fashion. This field has a number of distinct advantages for analysis: it is prevalent among all segments of a society, it is traditionally distanced from academic discourse, and it has an internal culture of change.

Fashion is a field of culture in which every individual participates. Though the world of high fashion—runways, magazines, and models—is small, it eventually affects almost every segment of society. Designer collections come from the runway, which lead to department store and discount store lines, which will eventually be sold at secondhand and thrift stores (Lurie, Lehmann). Everyone wears clothing, and whether or not individuals pay any attention to it, that clothing represents a part of the cultural field of fashion.

Another benefit of fashion as a field of inquiry is that it has often been trivialized, allowing for critical analysis without threatening something many people hold dear. Fashion is often dismissed in a way that other forms of culture have not been (Lurie, Crane 2000, Lehmann, Barthes). For this reason, Bourdieu recognized the value in studying fashion as opposed to other cultural forms. He wrote that discussing fashion when theorizing about culture is especially useful since it is not held as sacred (1993c). People are willing to consider critical analyses of fashion, though they would be unwilling to think about criticism of art or music, fields that are

seen as sacrosanct. In general, fashion is not imbued with such cultural value, so it is an appropriate field for critical discussion.

The final strength of fashion as an area of inquiry is its internal culture of change. Bourdieu wrote that “fashion is the latest fashion, the latest difference” (1993c: 135). Society values fashion because of its newness and originality. The changeover in fashion is phenomenal. Since the cultural objects that are in vogue at any given time change so much, the field is an apt one for studying any process of cultural change. In other fields, broad cultural trends may be harder to discern and take more time to develop.

The field of fashion illustrates the contemporary movement away from uniquely class-based cultural tastes. As in many realms of culture, there has been an increase in the variety of designers and styles accepted as elite over the past 20 years. In the early twentieth century, particular garments, cuts, and styles of dress were clearly associated with different social classes. Today, trends are much more “ambiguous and multifaceted” (Crane 2000: 6). There is an incredible amount of diversity, both in trends themselves and in sources of inspiration (134). The role of the designer has likewise shifted from a “dictator” of styles to a “suggestor,” offering ideas that sometimes are picked up and other times are not (Watson 9). In other words, the field of fashion is now a system in which designers offer a “grab bag” of ideas from which producers and consumers draw (Crane 2000:161). Many of the ideas put into this “grab bag” over the last half-century have sought inspiration from a traditionally unlikely source: the streets of the inner city. Historically, the more privileged classes set the trends, and by the time they trickled down to the clothing of the disadvantaged, the styles of the privileged had changed. Many trends no longer follow this pattern.

In many ways, the fashion world has embraced ideas and styles first associated with working-class or “street” cultures. Perhaps the earliest and most widely disseminated example of a fashion originating in the working class is blue jeans. Originally a sturdy garment intended for manual labor, designer jeans are now a staple in elite wardrobes (Davis, F.). As early as the 1930s, high fashion made a conscious point of emulating poverty; that era “made el-

egant the 'poor look'" (Hollander 385). Over the past twenty years, runways have seen a surge of styles inspired by inner city street cultures (Cawthorne). Recently, designer Helmut Lang "challenged the opulence and vivid colors of haute couture with very simple, drab clothes" (Crane 2000: 155) made from inexpensive fabrics (Watson 285), a move that has been interpreted as a "simulation of poverty in luxury fashion" (Crane 2000: 155–156). Such examples complicate attributing specific styles to particular social groups. The changes in sources of style are mirrored by changes in the types of stores found in chic, upscale shopping areas. On Boston's Newbury Street or Beverly Hills' Rodeo Drive, small shops catering to new and diversified tastes have joined the tailors and couturiers. Although some garments and designers remain elite due to high prices, and the clothes worn by the working class in everyday life differ from those worn by the wealthy, it is important to note the rising ambiguity of what is considered a fashionable style. In contemporary culture, the objectified component of fashion—that is, particular styles and sources of inspiration—has no universal root.

The diversification of fashionable styles may initially seem to negate the relevance of cultural capital theory since individual style does not necessarily provide information about a person's social status. Mixed plaids and shaggy hair may imply homelessness or may signify a second home on the Cape. However, observable differences in objectified culture do not account for differences in embodied codes of consumption. Though the type of objectified class differences in dress prevalent a century ago—differences like skirt lengths or types of hats—no longer play a role in the field of fashion, this does not necessarily correlate to an equivalent shift in the class-based distribution of embodied capital. The prevalence of diverse styles and sources of inspiration makes for an ambiguous code of cultural capital in the field of fashion.

Rather than negating the relevance of cultural capital, this ambiguity actually serves to further mask the embodied code of consumption possessed by the privileged class. In a system where the styles of the working class are thought of as less valuable than the styles of the upper class, members of the working class can as-

pire to assimilate into the upper class by acquiring objectified capital. If they earn enough money, they can purchase the right style and blend into the crowd. In a system where embodied capital is more important than objectified capital, however, the situation is much bleaker. Regardless of economic capital, assimilation now requires not only owning the right styles but also having the same attitudes about them, understanding how to put them together, and knowing on what occasions to wear them. Like all embodied capital, this cannot be easily transferred. It matters less what styles an upwardly mobile individual owns; what matters is how he or she wears them. Does he think of his retro plaid blazer as an historical statement and ironic rejection of the opulence of high fashion? Or does he wear it because it's been in his closet for thirty years? If an upwardly mobile woman does not know when to wear a given style of dress, it does not matter how many garments she owns or what their labels say: without embodied cultural capital, assimilation remains a distant dream. Thus, the disadvantaged are left to struggle with the prospect of embodied codes of consumption and attached meanings that are virtually impossible to acquire.

EXTENDING THE THEORY

Though fashion is a far-reaching component of culture, it is only one component. The idea of increased importance of embodied capital in the face of an increasingly pluralistic cultural climate extends across fields. The rapid pace of change and transformation in fashion means that the process of diversification is likely more advanced than in other fields. The trend of diversification in fashion can serve as a window into cultural processes that are likely to become increasingly prominent in the cultural climate as a whole. Examples of similar diversification from other fields are not difficult to find. The culture considered valuable by society has increasingly diverse sources, including many historically subjugated groups. One oft-cited example is jazz, a genre that made a “musical evolution from folk art to popular art to high art” (Lopes 3). One hundred years ago, it was accused of provoking immorality, but

throughout the twentieth century—the same period during which the look of poverty became valued in the field of fashion—jazz shed its negative reputation and became increasingly respected as an art form (Leonard 32). Another example of diversifying cultural tastes can be found in elite universities adding courses on popular literature and advertising art alongside classes on classic novels and ancient art. As in the field of fashion, the social meaning of the consumption of music, literature, or art depends on the embodied cultural capital through which it is consumed. For example, reading a romance novel as part of an Ivy League education is different from reading it on the subway. As the cultural climate of society continues to change, the distributions of objectified and embodied cultural capital will likely grow even farther apart. As this happens, the importance of embodied capital will continue to grow.

For Bourdieu, cultural subjugation was not difficult to find. The distribution of objectified cultural capital pointed toward an arbitrary hierarchy of cultural forms in which objects originating in the disadvantaged classes had no value to the privileged classes (1984: 57). Cultural boundaries were clear: the upper class possessed one type of art, literature, and music; the working class owned another variety or none at all. In today's world, however, boundaries are blurred. As the analysis of fashion shows, working-class and "street" cultures are often sources of inspiration and admiration for elite cultural producers and consumers. On face value, it looks as though the role of culture in stratification has decreased; tastes have been diversified, and the upper class appreciates many cultural objects created by less privileged groups. However, embodied capital maintains its powerful role in distinguishing between classes. While patterns of dissemination of objectified cultural capital have been blurred and in many instances reversed, the stratification of society has actually increased. In the United States, the percentage of the total income earned by the lowest fifth of income-earners has decreased over the last 40 years, while that earned by the highest fifth has steadily risen. Furthermore, the portion of income earned by the top five percent increased substantially over the same time span, meaning that the most privileged have sustained and consid-

erably improved their relative dominance (US Census Bureau).

This paper opened with the question of whether the theory of cultural capital remains relevant. Embodied cultural capital is now more important than ever. Owning the right CDs, going to the right museums, or wearing the right styles is no longer enough to transcend social stratification because the source of cultural distinction stems from the way these cultural objects and experiences are approached. Embodied mindsets and attitudes cannot be purchased for any price, so social mobility is a complex and difficult proposition. To be upwardly mobile, individuals must not only adopt the right tastes or have the right experiences—they must also approach these tastes and experiences in the right manner. If people who lack embodied capital go to museums but make the wrong comments about a piece of art, they will be marked as less intelligent by their privileged peers. If they attend concerts but do not know how to act during intermission, they will be perceived as less respectful than their privileged peers. If they own the latest coats, boots, and frocks, but do not know when it is appropriate to wear each, they will be ridiculed by and excluded from privileged groups. Those privileged peers, instead of seeing disadvantaged individuals as deficient in cultural capital, see them as less intelligent, less respectful, and less stylish. As in the school system example, the deficit of capital is perceived as an inherent trait. Thus, symbolic violence is exercised such that the privileged remain privileged, believing that the disadvantaged deserve their lesser status.

These bleak trends suggest that society needs a thorough understanding of the role of cultural capital more than ever. The strength of embodied cultural capital as a weapon of symbolic violence lies in its ability to be misrecognized at an unconscious level, to be interpreted as an inherent trait of its holders rather than a social resource used to maintain privilege. Breaking the pattern of misrecognition is a complex process; as discussed earlier, embodied capital is not easily transmitted to disadvantaged individuals. However, complexity does not necessitate impossibility. To rectify inequalities in embodied capital, disadvantaged youths need exposure to valued cultural objects as well as education about atti-

tudes and associated knowledge that privileged youth already have. At the same time, privileged youth must experience working class culture not as something to be studied or adopted ironically, but as something to be truly appreciated in the same way traditionally “high-brow” culture is. Equality of cultural capital does not demand that everyone holds the same attitudes toward cultural objects, only that certain attitudes are not held as more legitimate than others. The disadvantaged must be exposed to the attitudes of the privileged, and the privileged must likewise be exposed to the attitudes of the disadvantaged—not in an academic setting or museum, not as something to be studied or analyzed, but as something to be appreciated and valued.

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