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Comment on Alan Warde/1

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Comment on Alan Warde/1

by Michael Eve

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Has the relationship between culture and class changed? Alan Warde's discussion of his focus group data and data from surveys and qualitative interviews tackles the framework which has dominated the discussion over the last decade – since the publication of Peterson and Kern's influential [1996] article on cultural “omnivorousness.” Warde and his colleagues find much evidence of cultural “omnivorousness” (the idea that the more educated and culturally dominant differ from their lesser brethren in the breadth of their listening, reading, etc., but do not disdain more “popular” genres). But they also find evidence of continuing class distinctions on *some* items (from modern literature to Mahler). And find that other items (e.g., Van Gogh, Vivaldi's *Four Seasons*) please most (though not all) people in all social classes. Warde argues therefore that his data (and that of others) support the view that 1) the omnivorousness of some, 2) the existence of areas of taste shared by most, and 3) the existence of some items which distinguish the classes fairly sharply are all compatible with each other. So it is perfectly possible – and indeed factually the case – that overall class differences in patterns of taste remain, at the same time as much common ground exists. This is important, because much of the debate since Peterson and Kern's article has tended to imply that omnivorousness and class distinction are alternatives. And this in turn has sometimes led to incautious ideas about class distinctions in taste disappearing. The research of Warde and his colleagues should move the debate to a different stage, avoiding simplistic dichotomies.

But what precisely is the general significance of the findings? Notwithstanding some doubts, Warde seems to interpret them as showing that, while class *differences* remain, class *hierarchy* has become less clear. Although different social classes

continue to have different overall cultural preferences, there is “attenuation” in the value of particular cultural tastes in the assertion of social superiority. There is “no longer” recognition of fixed standards, with “high culture” (“legitimate culture” in Bourdieu’s terms) having more value than “popular culture.”

This kind of interpretation of results as expressing a historical change is rather frequent. Analyses of cultural consumption which take Bourdieu as their reference point often see the gospel according to Bourdieu as representing “class divisions in the past” – i.e., the 1960s, at least in France – and their own results as “the present.” It is in this way that results on the specific matter of cultural preferences are usually inserted into more general ideas of “changing class boundaries” or at least changing relationships between class divisions and culture, or consumption. And it is at this point that comparisons often take the form of “declining class distinctions” or, more modestly, a looser relationship between (say) cultural consumption and class. Through comparisons of this kind the sociology of consumption and culture has tended to become a bastion for assertions that class divisions are not what they were. However, the comparisons made tend to be between Bourdieu’s theoretical claims on the one hand, and present-day empirical data on the other hand. Warde is aware of the problem of knowing what the situation really was like thirty or fifty years ago, as various asides in his article show; but in the end he seems to interpret his data in this way as illustrating social change (so “Command of legitimate culture is *no longer* the sole means to obtain social esteem from expressions of taste”).

It is not easy, of course, to compare present-day data with past data, for appropriate sources often do not exist. However, more could be made of Bourdieu’s own data – or rather, those bits of us he lets us see in his published work. So if we look in detail at the preferences of 1960s French interviewees as to musical works, films, and so on, laid out in the tables in *Distinction*, *L’amour de l’art* and elsewhere, we find a very great deal of overlap between different classes – much more than many of Bourdieu’s statements would let us imagine. In many cases, even Bourdieu’s habit of adjusting class schemas *ad hoc* in order to exploit those differences in the data which do exist, is not sufficient to produce clear-cut fissures. We can only conclude that even in 1960s France class divisions in cultural preferences were often not so clear (one suspects that a certain number of the class associations Bourdieu sees as emerging from his data would not have come up to conventional standards of statistical significance, and not only because of small sample sizes). There was considerable shared ground between the preferences expressed in different classes.

If we move away from the questionnaire findings and examine the extracts from qualitative interviews, and the analyses of heard discourse which constitute much of the richness of Bourdieu’s work, these also do not suggest that class divisions in the

past were as clear-cut as is sometimes imagined. Take, for example, the extract from the interview with the lawyer presented in chapter V of *Distinction*, a solid member of the Paris haute bourgeoisie. Bourdieu gives ten pages to this man, who he seems to have seen as the apotheosis of upper class taste. This man was one of only a very small number of interviewees cited in any of Bourdieu's works who mentioned other social groups defined in anything like class terms; but it is interesting to note the nature of such references. He is scornful about *nouveau riche* attempts to use culture for openly prestige purposes rather than for personal pleasure, and equally scornful of conventional "bourgeois" standards (i.e. the standards which one might associate with this person's "own" class). This man does not attempt to assert the superiority of his own taste by reference to universally-valid canons. He certainly flaunts his "ease" and familiarity with art, expensive furniture, etc. but precisely in order to stress his independence from conventional standards he also stresses the "personal" nature of all his tastes. He asserts himself via his enthusiasms and his ability to play with established distinctions, more than by explicit condemnation of other people's standards. All this seems quite compatible with the attitudes expressed in Warde's focus groups.

If we go to the other end of the social scale, and look at the description of working-class taste in, say, the chapter on the subject in *Distinction*, we find little evidence of workers acknowledging the superiority of upper-class tastes and considerable evidence of them joyfully embracing tastes different from canons of "legitimate taste," rejecting *nouvelle cuisine* in favour of high fat dishes, doubting the meaningfulness of abstract art, etc. Bourdieu explains away this evident assertion of the validity of different tastes as a matter of resignedly "choosing what is necessary," i.e. deciding to like what one's life conditions make available. However, it is surely true of all social classes that their tastes are based on the "conditions of existence" which shape their experience, and that everyone values their own experience. And Bourdieu has difficulty in finding statements which explicitly acknowledge hierarchical superiority and inferiority.

With regard to omnivorousness, it is clear from scattered comments that Bourdieu's more educated and higher class interviewees relish many "popular" genres, from working-class restaurants at Les Halles (when still a food market) to pop singers, blues musicians and so on.

So all the features Warde notes as characterizing his data seem to have been present, at least to some extent, in the past too. But if we free Warde's data from the task of demonstrating change in class distinctions since the 1960s, in some ways this makes it more interesting. Even as presented in a short article, it is clearly rich and vivid data, and Warde's interpretation of the main themes emerging from the discussions is convincing. In fact the elements Warde stresses seem to emerge from

the great majority of the discussions, and so may be taken as characterizing very widespread frames of reference. A few aspects may be specific to the U.K. context: for example, the acute fear of sounding “pretentious” may be partly an expression of a traditional British suspicion of intellectualism. But most of the features could probably be found elsewhere and Warde may well have provided a coherent account of how people describe the rules of taste which is applicable widely: the almost universal stress on the idea that taste is something personal, the general reluctance to make cultural taste into an explicit criterion of social prestige, the suspicion that other people may express preferences for social reasons, the condemnation of “snobbery.” But does all this imply a reluctance to impose judgments, and so an attenuation of the role of culture in social distinctions? Bourdieu would probably have interpreted the insistence on taste as a profoundly personal matter, and one of choice and identity (so not inherited from one’s class background) as evidence of “misrecognition” – the naturalizing tendency to deny any social implications to one’s actions, while at the same time continuing to actuate social distinctions in practice. Misrecognition necessary if such distinctions are to be put into practice “sincerely” and with conviction, not merely instrumentally.

There is perhaps support for Bourdieu’s stance if we think of the contrast between the responses members of focus groups or interviewees make to general questions regarding good and bad taste or cultural standards, and the judgments they make in everyday life. Answers in interviews and focus groups are of course influenced by the discourses conventionally associated with those words and questions. Quite a lot of the discussion in the focus groups seems to have revolved around stimuli regarding “good taste” and “bad taste.” It is perhaps relevant, therefore, to remember some typical usages of these terms. The Collins Cobuild English Language Dictionary (1987) (worth citing because based on a database of usage) gives the following entry: “If you say that something that is said or done *in good taste*, *in bad taste*, etc., you are talking about how offensive it is. E.g. *That remark was in rather poor taste* (...) *Her jokes may be sharp, but they are always in the best possible taste.*” Other dictionaries provide very similar examples of uses of the terms “good taste” and “bad taste.” The link to offensiveness may therefore be simply part of conventional discourse regarding the word “taste” in the context of judgments, rather than any new reluctance to make judgments of good and bad taste except in a moral context (as Warde suggests). More in general, statements made in response to general questions probably evoke responses different from those of everyday practice. All the people interviewed in the focus groups (and individual interviews) certainly made continual choices and distinctions in their everyday lives, for it would be impossible not

to do so. And presumably they all reject other people's tastes on certain occasions, using expression like "I wouldn't be seen dead in that," "How can he possibly live in a sitting room like that?," etc., as well as very decided expressions of one's own identity, and its absolute incompatibility with a particular taste or style preferred by other people ("That is not for me"). Sometimes, such expressions may be accompanied by expressions of derision, repulsion, etc. The vigour of such judgments in particular situations contrasts sharply with that timidity in expressing general judgments which emerges from Warde's focus groups. In their everyday practice, people continually mark boundaries around consumption (including cultural consumption). That they do this at the same time as denying that such boundary-drawing has anything more than personal implications is interesting, but not necessarily evidence that cultural distinctions play little part in class reproduction.

So even if Warde is right that there has been some increase in shyness (compared to the past) over asserting that there are fixed cultural standards, this does not necessarily mean that cultural differences have less of a role in reinforcing social boundaries. Warde alludes to this possibility at the end of his article. If enthusiasms over particular kinds of music, literature, etc. lead people to form groups, friendships, professional alliances, etc. this inevitably has profound consequences for the social structure. From this perspective, what is most significant in data on consumption (including cultural consumption) is who they put together and who they do not put together. In an essay on commensality, Claude Grignon [2001] argues that commensality marks social "morphology:" who eats with whom shows the boundaries of social groups, who is excluded, who is (or is forced to be) part of a particular group. In a similar way, perhaps other consumption practices may have a similar role, bringing people together and separating them. What people do in friendships, for example, is mostly talk to each other. A lot of this talk is about cultural enthusiasms or distastes. The ability to participate in particular social groups probably depends in part on the judgments made, on preferences and on enthusiasms. Next to these questions of social morphology questions of snobbery, or of conscious strategy using culture to assert oneself seem somewhat secondary.

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Eve, *Comment on Alan Warde*/1

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Abstract: The comment questions whether cultural distinctions in the 1960s were as rigidly aligned by class as is sometimes believed. Alan Warde's data from focus groups and questionnaires bring out some fundamental ways in which people think their own taste and that of others – for example, the way they continually emphasize taste being “just personal” (as against being class-based or other group-based judgments). But rather than reflecting any new, more “democratic” tendencies, this may be more revealing of general mechanisms underlying judgments of taste, and incorporating them as parts of personal identity and everyday guides for action and discrimination. The comment suggests interpreting the statements of interviewees in these terms rather than in terms of dichotomic historical comparisons.

Keywords: class distinctions, culture, Bourdieu, social change, consumption.

Michael Eve teaches sociology at the University of Eastern Piedmont (Alessandria, Italy), where his various courses include one on the sociology of consumption. He has explored various fields of social behaviour, applying particular attention to social networks and the way personal relations (from kin ties to friendships) structure social processes, from social and occupational mobility to geographical moves. His current research interests include stratification and migration (including the relationship between the two). In the area of consumption he is currently trying to analyze the concept of “usefulness”.