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Comment on Omar Lizardo/1

by Timothy J. Dowd

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Omar Lizardo has a history of grappling with important ideas in an innovative and insightful fashion [for instance, see Lizardo 2005; Lizardo 2006]. He continues in this fashion in “The Question of Culture Consumption and Stratification Revisited” (hereafter, QCC&SR). In particular, he notes a conundrum surrounding a “simple homology.” This homology provides a convenient way of linking both consumption and stratification – whereby the hierarchal ranking of lifestyle (e.g. consumption practices) maps tightly onto to the hierarchical ranking of actors in the broader stratification system. The conundrum arises in that such a mapping between consumption and stratification, while straightforward and intuitive, is analytically simplistic. That is, as Lizardo observes, much research shows that this simple homology does not hold.

Lizardo approaches this conundrum, not by discarding the simple homology, but rather by situating it in a broader historical context. He argues that its current appeal is partly due to the fact that this simple homology once applied in the past, thereby leaving some traces of relevance for the present. The contours of his argument are defined by two analytical strategies. The first strategy is the delineation of two modes of consumption that may serve as markers of the broader stratification system. “Objectified” appropriation refers to a mode that derives from sole possession of cultural objects (e.g. paintings), if not the exclusive patronage of cultural creators (e.g. painters). In contrast, “embodied” appropriation refers to a different mode that flows from the consideration of cultural objects, particularly the manner in which they are apprehended and evaluated. Thus, these modes of consumption

highlight both ownership of prestigious objects and valorized ways of “decoding” such objects.

His second analytical strategy is to map how these two modes have corresponded to stratification across the centuries – focusing on regimes of cultural stratification in Europe and North America. Although not explicitly defined, a “regime” apparently refers to the particular way in which objectified and embodied appropriation combine to mark (or not mark) position in the stratification system. While some of these regimes are meaningful only to particular groups within a society (e.g. the “aristocratic regime”), Lizardo is mainly interested in those regimes that have widespread currency across groups (i.e. “universality”).

The first regime reigned from the Renaissance to the mid 1800s. The nobility and aristocracy of Europe were distinct in terms of their ownership and patronage of paintings, music and other relatively scarce cultural objects; however, the manner in which they appreciated art, music, and the like was comparable to that of other classes (hence the phrase “democratic tastes”). In this regime, only the objective mode of consumption mapped clearly onto the stratification system, delineating nobles and aristocrats from all others. The second regime spans the mid 1800s to the mid 1900s. Objective appropriation changed as once scarce cultural objects became plentiful (the “consumer revolution”) and as conspicuous consumption proliferated. However, embodied appropriation increased greatly in relevance as tastes became much less democratic on both sides of the Atlantic. This occurred, in part, as urban elites established organizations by which to construct and celebrate a “canon” in such realms as music and the visual arts. That is, they sacralized a collection of works that require a sophisticated understanding (“high culture”) and that is distinct from the mundane fare of popular culture. In this regime, embodied appropriation served as salient marker of stratification, with the upper-middle gaining distinction for their “highbrow” approach to esteemed objects that they did not necessarily own.

The final regime extends from the mid 1900s to the present – a regime that Lizardo labels the “embodied cultural capital regime.” The label is telling because the objectified mode is but a weak marker of position in the stratification system; although the embodied mode continues to serve as an important marker, it now does so in a different fashion. In the present regime, the once clear divide between high culture and popular culture is blurred if not breached. This has occurred, in part, because educational curricula have fostered among expanding segments of the population an analytical approach to cultural objects of any sort. Those possessing embodied cultural capital (e.g. the highly educated) gain distinction from how they evaluate cultural objects that range from Beethoven to the Beatles, thereby making problematic any clear hierarchy of cultural objects. Thus, as the “highbrow” approach of

the previous regime has given way to a wide-ranging “aesthetic disposition” of the present regime, any one-to-one correspondence between hierarchies of consumption and stratification has faded.

I find the contours of Lizardo’s argument to be very compelling. Its historical vantage provides an attractive way to bring together works on cultural capital and cultural omnivorism – works that sometimes seem disconnected if not at odds. Yet, how he fills in those contours brings to mind a criticism that is sometimes directed at the “new institutionalism in organizational sociology” – an approach that Lizardo references in QCC&SR. “The problem that new institutionalist research has run into is that most empirical efforts have focused on environmental changes that are not effectively linked to the activities of individuals and organizations” [Hirsch and Lounsbury 1997, 411]. To a certain degree, this criticism applies to QCC&SR. It lists a number of actors that played important roles in major environmental change – the rise and fall of cultural stratification regimes; however, its listing tends more towards a static description than a dynamic account. In other words, we read more about the presence and impact of these actors rather than what they actually did. To be fair, this could result from the nature of the paper itself: Lizardo admirably surveys several centuries of developments in but a few pages, thereby leaving little space for detail. Nevertheless, I suggest that highlighting dynamic aspects of these actors actually bolsters the contours of his broader argument. Consider, then, the following points as friendly amendments to his paper.

Lizardo rightly speaks of cultural entrepreneurs and the expanding array of organizations that they founded to sacralize “high culture” – with their notable period of activity occurring from the mid 1800s to early 1900s. However, by heeding their dynamic combination of the old with the new, we can foreground how these actors negotiated different regimes. Regarding the old, for example, the efforts of these entrepreneurs to construct a field of high culture had clear roots in an earlier era. DeNora [1991] compellingly demonstrates that aristocrats in Vienna of the late 1700s developed an ideology of serious music. They celebrated music that is cerebral and challenging rather than merely entertaining and light and giving, and they gave primacy, in particular, to the music of Beethoven. Their ideology did not gain widespread acceptance at the time, as these aristocrats failed to build organizations that championed serious music. Instead, DeNora argues that this languishing ideology would eventually gain new life, as it informed and motivated cultural entrepreneurs from the mid-1800s onward who built such organizations. While Lizardo does allude to such an early ideology among aristocrats, he could forcefully explore the connections *across* regimes by calling attention to how and when actors successfully transformed disparate and fleeting elements of an earlier era (e.g. studied consideration

of musical material) into an embodied appropriation that became “universal” [see DiMaggio 1987].

We can also provide some dynamism to these cultural entrepreneurs by heeding their innovations that helped usher in a new regime. For instance, the regime of embodied cultural capital initially took root in music as cultural entrepreneurs and their organizations moved away both from an emphasis on contemporary works and from offering what William Weber [2001; Weber 2006] labeled “miscellany” – an extensive reliance on excerpts from numerous works that spanned disparate categories (e.g. symphonic works and solo vocal works). Such innovations required that audiences engage with concert material in a new fashion. Some of these entrepreneurs worked to instruct audiences on how to behave when confronting a few complete works from the past (the “canon”). As a result, the boisterous audiences that were sometimes found at Italian opera houses eventually encountered the innovative efforts of Toscanini; he developed a range of techniques to socialize (and quiet) the audience so that its members would listen to works with rapt attention [Santoro 2008; see Stamatov 2002]. Within and beyond music [see DiMaggio 1982a; DiMaggio 1982b; McConachie 1988], cultural entrepreneurs helped shape the shift from the rowdy behavior that could accompany the “democratic tastes” of earlier regimes [see Levine 1988] to the refined engagement that marks recent regimes. Seen in this light, embodied appropriation is an ongoing project that addresses both the cognitive (i.e. ways of apprehending) and the corporal (i.e. ways of acting).

While other actors likewise played roles in this ongoing project of embodied appropriation, they too receive a static treatment in QCC&SR. For example, the popular culture industry comes across simply as a foil to high culture. Yet, as DiMaggio [1991] has argued, the initial construction of the field of high culture went hand in hand with the construction of the field of popular culture. In the U.S., for instance, personnel in the early recording and recording industries touted orchestral and operatic music so as to legitimize their business endeavors – showing that these supposed “toys” could provide audiences with both popular music that pleased and celebrated masterpieces that edified [Dowd 2003]. Consequently, this portion of the popular culture industry not only benefitted from revenues associated with high culture, they also endorsed the aesthetic merits of such music. For better or worse, classical music was defined and re-defined as recordings circulated on both sides of the Atlantic, with the burgeoning ownership of albums playing a role in how people assessed classical music [e.g. Katz 1998; Maisonneuve 2001]. Indeed, it was partly this proliferation of mass-mediated classical music in America that inspired the ire of Adorno [1938; Adorno 1941]. Yet, not all took such a view of the popular culture industry. Baumann [2007] maintains that the nascent film industries of several European nations

likewise negotiated the proffering of both entertainment and art – inspiring little of the Adorno-esque critique that reigned in the U.S. Such historical examples raise two issues for Lizardo’s argument. First, perhaps objective appropriation need not always be a costly or stringently exclusive – as in the case of classical music recordings. If so, then, this mode of consumption may have taken on a new type of role in an era where various media allow for the careful and repeated study of cultural objects – as the research of Antoine Hennion [2001] suggests. Second, if popular culture industries do, in fact, undermine the once-salient divide between art and commerce, then the emergence of that impact is something to be explained (rather than assumed) given the early history of this industry whereby the divide was both acknowledged and upheld.

Finally, the dynamism of actors matters because it brings specificity to the contours of Lizardo’s argument. In particular, this dynamism could make clear the fashion by which one regime of cultural stratification gives way to another. Institutional research finds that, in some instances, the transition between regimes is abrupt and clear-cut – as when a single court decision ushers in a new policy regime under which an entire industry operates [Dobbin and Dowd 2000]. However, it finds in, other instances, a gradual and ongoing transition – as when major recording firms shift from operating under a regime of centralized production to one of decentralized production [Dowd 2004]. These differences in transition are not inconsequential, as they reveal history unfolding in divergent ways.

While it may not have been Lizardo’s intended meaning, I read the description of the embodied cultural capital regime as offering a decisive transition. That is, although some blurring of the divide between high and popular culture had occurred earlier, the success of Pop Art in the 1960s represented the official breach in the divide – a breach that is seemingly accepted from that point onward. That stands in contrast with certain cross-national research work on critics, journalists, and educators. These scholars find that these actors grappled with this divide well after the 1960s, thereby suggesting that the breach continued to be negotiated rather than firm. Furthermore, the manner in which this grappling played out varies by nations; the high culture/pop culture divide is upheld in some countries to a greater extent than others [see Bevers 2001; Janssen *et al.* 2008; van Venrooij and Schmutz *forth.*; Verboord and van Rees *forth.*]. Thus, by heeding the actions of critics, educators and others, we not only link the recent regime to the efforts of particular actors, we may come away with different view of the regime’s historical trajectory.

I realize that Omar Lizardo may not have elaborated the above actors because his argument relies on the research of others who, in fact, did so. However, by insightfully bringing together wide-ranging research that addresses particular actors across history, his argument also raises another question for further consideration.

How did the efforts of all these actors *combine* to create the evolving regimes of cultural stratification that Lizardo lays out for the reader? That this question is so inspiring is a testament to his innovative and insightful scholarship.

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Abstract: While the question of *whether* there exists a connection between social stratification and lifestyle differentiation seems to be uncontroversial, the primary issue that continues to bedevil research at the intersection of the sociology of culture and the study of structured inequality, concerns the precise nature of this connection. While various answers have been proposed to this question, the current state of the field is one of “ambiguity” as to what is the best way to proceed. In this paper, I use a long-term historical perspective to tackle this question. I argue that understanding the cultural stratification system that appears to have coalesced in the richer societies of the contemporary Global North, we must attend to the historical origin and trajectory of the system of production of symbolic goods in the West, and how this has interacted with the system of scholastic “production” of consumers of such goods. This system can best be described as an embodied cultural capital regime, in which the ability to indirectly decode the formal properties of cultural goods using habitualized schemes of perception and appreciation has replaced the capacity to directly acquire cultural works through purchase as the primary marker of status.

Keywords: cultural entrepreneurs, Lizardo, consumption, art, cultural capital.

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