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Comment on Omar Lizardo/2.

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Comment on Omar Lizardo/2

by Michèle Ollivier

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The paper addresses problems with theories of cultural consumption which presuppose the existence of a simple homology between a one-dimensional hierarchy of cultural goods and a corresponding one-dimensional hierarchy of social positions (the elite vs. mass model). The author argues that neither cultural goods nor social positions should be ranked on one-dimensional scales. The paper proposes to reframe the issue within a long-term historical perspective. The main argument is that contrary to the situation of early modern times, distinction today is no longer based on conspicuous display of objectified cultural capital. Rather, it is based primarily on the possession of embodied dispositions which now transcend the high-low boundary (hence the rise of omnivorousness or cultural eclecticism). This shift in the criteria of distinction is traced back to the rise of an autonomous art field in the Nineteenth century and to the emergence of an elaborate system of aesthetic appreciation. Rather than signalling a weakening of the boundary between high culture and popular entertainment, cultural eclecticism represents a generalization of what Bourdieu called the “aesthetic disposition” outside the boundaries of high culture to popular culture and objects in everyday life. The paper traces the emergence of the aesthetic disposition in the Nineteenth century within the field of high culture and its later transposition beyond high culture to objects in everyday life.

The paper presents an interesting and in my view convincing argument about the historical roots of recent interest in cultural eclecticism. However, the paper also seems at times to present a simplified view of historical transformation, as if embodied

dispositions became uniformly and simultaneously shared across all fractions of the upper class. Surprisingly, given the author's critique of one-dimensional conceptions of cultural and social hierarchies, the paper gives the impression that while the criteria of distinction have changed (from the ability to subsidize artists and to purchase works of art to the embodied knowledge of aesthetic criteria of appreciation), the basic opposition between elite and mass remained the same over time.

As argued by Bourdieu and many others [including Lizardo 2006], the elite-mass model is an oversimplification and never was an accurate representation of processes of distinction. People are generally most concerned to distinguish themselves from others who are close to them in social space, and distinction is often directed horizontally rather than vertically. In this perspective, the Nineteenth century saw not only the rise of an autonomous art field and the separation of high culture from popular entertainment, but also, and most importantly, the emergence of a split within high culture between the Bohemian avant-garde and the Bourgeois philistines, or between class fractions whose power rests primarily on economic capital and those whose main resource is cultural capital. This process is well described for example by Ferry in *What is the Good Life?*, by Nathalie Heinich in *L'élite artistique* and, in a much lighter style, by David Brooks in *Bobos in Paradise*. Nathalie Heinich, in particular, argues that the Romantic figure of the Bohemian artist involved a profound shift in the principles used for evaluating excellence and in the composition of the elites. Documenting simultaneous changes in the organization of work (from artisan to vocational regimes) and in systems of evaluation (from a regime of community to a regime of singularity), she identifies the twin figures of the artist and the dandy as central to these new regimes, the first using the principle of singularity to produce works of art, the second applying the new ideal to his (rarely her) own person.

In this perspective and in line with the argument presented in the paper, omnivorousness should be seen neither as an entirely new phenomenon nor as necessarily involving a weakening of distinction. Rather than a linear extension of the aesthetic disposition, I would argue that omnivorousness signals a reversal of the hierarchy between dominant and dominated principles of evaluation. With the greater availability of consumer goods and the increasing importance of education both as a status marker and as a means of getting ahead in life, what used to be the dominated principle of hierarchization – the aesthetic disposition – found primarily among artists and cultivated fractions of the upper class, is gaining increasing prominence and may be becoming the dominant principle of evaluation. A similar argument is made by Richard Florida [2002, 170] in his depiction of the lifestyle of the so-called “creative class,” whose inconspicuous consumption represents a reversal of Veblen's leisure class: “Status and identity for these people come not much from the goods they have,

but from the experiences they have.” Experience is a key term here, precisely because it refers to embodied rather than objectified cultural capital. The fundamental opposition between competing principles of distinction which emerged in the Nineteenth century and still exists today does not come out very clearly in the paper. Rather, the shift from objectified to embodied capital is presented as a linear process of change from one type of distinction to another.

The elite vs. mass model may still have heuristic value, but it remains an oversimplification of patterns of cultural consumption. While some studies order consumption on a linear scale [see for example Chan and Goldthorpe 2007 – from higher to lower volume and diversity – others find more complex patterns. Many identify, at the upper echelons of socioeconomic status, an opposition between (older) traditional high culture aficionados and (younger) omnivores whose tastes are more diverse; at lower levels of socioeconomic status, one finds the opposition between younger generations who prefer modern pop genres, older fans of traditional folk culture and a large group of non participants [see for example van Eijck 2001].

The argument presented in the paper dovetails with my own work on the existence of different types of cultural eclecticism, namely humanist, populist, and indifferent [Ollivier 2008]. Humanist eclecticism corresponds precisely to what is identified in the paper as an extension of the aesthetic disposition beyond the field of high culture. Found mostly among people who possess high levels of formal education and excellent knowledge of the arts and culture, it is based on selective and sometimes ironic appropriation of elements of popular culture within a predominantly highbrow profile. The paradox, as illustrated by Johnston and Baumann [2007] in their study of attitudes towards gourmet food, is that wider tastes often tend to be highly exclusive, when they encompass rare or exotic elements situated at the extremes the high-low spectrum, shunning anything in the middle that is associated with the mainstream and is easily available to all.

Finally, the paper’s attempt to present a sweeping picture of transformations in artistic production and consumption over four centuries in Europe and the United States means that it pays less attention to historical details. The paper contains several statements which are not consistent with other research that I have read on the topic. For example, the paper argues that the artist as a social type emerged in the late Nineteenth century whereas Heinich [2005] situates its emergence much earlier. The paper argues that debates about mass society emerged in the middle of the Twentieth century, but Huysen [1986] mentions similar debates in relation to reading in the second half of the Nineteenth century. The paper states that the impressionists innovated by choosing to depict commonplace subjects as opposed to religious or historical topics. But Ferry [2005] argues that this change occurred

two centuries earlier in Seventeenth century Dutch painting. The paper argues that changes “served to partially release the artist from being dependent on the state,” but the state did not uniformly play a significant role in subsidizing the arts in all national contexts.

In short, the overall argument presented in the paper is convincing and interesting, but the paper may be trying to cover too much ground. By failing to pay attention to national and historical variations in the process of change from objectified to embodied cultural capital, the paper gives the impression that this process has been uniform and linear across time and space. This produces an oversimplified and at time not quite accurate account of historical change.

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Comment on Omar Lizardo/2

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 capital, Bourdieu, sociology of art, mass culture, omnivore.

Michèle Ollivier is Professor of Sociology at the University of Ottawa. Her current research focuses on tastes and cultural consumption in relation to class and gender inequality, with a special interest in the uses of the rhetoric of openness to cultural diversity in different fields.