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Comment on Omar Lizardo/3

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by Gisèle Sapiro

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The idea that there is a unidimensional classificatory ranking of cultural goods that corresponds to a unidimensional hierarchy of prestige has been rightly criticized. This, however, does not mean that there is no relation between cultural consumption and status or social position. In Bourdieu's theory of distinction [Bourdieu 1979], which challenges the very concept of unidimensional stratification, there are competing hierarchical systems (mainly between the fractions of the dominant class endowed with cultural capital and those endowed with economic capital). This differentiation which entailed the autonomization of cultural capital from economic capital derives from a change in the mode of reproduction that had started in the mid-Nineteenth century in Western countries: as the educational system became institutionalized and educational policies developed, the direct designation of the inheritors by the families was replaced by an indirect selection process, mediated by the school [Bourdieu 1989]. Bourdieu also distinguishes two modes of consumption, a direct mode by material appropriation of cultural goods, and an indirect one, which is symbolic appropriation. This second mode relies on embodied cultural capital.

Drawing on this last distinction by Bourdieu, Omar Lizardo's paper provides an original and interesting response to the question of the social hierarchization of cultural consumption. He argues that until the mid-Nineteenth century, material appropriation was the prevailing mode of consumption, whereas since then it is embodied cultural capital, thanks to the role played by schools in passing on the values and criteria for judging artworks. This stimulating hypothesis seems highly plausible,

though the historical overview on which it relies needs to be qualified according to at least three factors: the secularization process; the variations between kinds of cultural goods; the variations between national histories. I will discuss this overview using examples coming mainly from the literature and from French cultural history, both of which are overlooked in the paper, while each of them historically constituted a model for the legitimizing of cultural goods.

Drawing on Baxandall, Lizardo argues that in the early modern period the schemes of perception and appreciation of cultural products as well as the stylistic devices used by artists “were drawn from a ‘cultural repertoire’ that was widely *shared* across social groups.” But, as noted a little further by Lizardo himself, this argument must be qualified. Firstly, the primitive accumulation of cultural capital by courtly aristocracy had a more important social impact than he admits, from the Seventeenth century onward, since it allowed the “gens de lettre” to emancipate from clientelism and patronage. This was not limited to the court. The absolute state fostered the growth of academic circles in the Seventeenth century France, thus contributing to the first emergence of a literary space, as argued by Alain Viala [1985]. This process was linked to secularization and to the emergence of a nation-state: the absolute state supported the men of letters writing in vernacular language in their competition with the learned University scholars, writing in Latin and controlled by the Church. The function attributed to the Académie Française, when it was established in 1635, was the linguistic unification of the kingdom. In 1701, it created a poetry prize.

Secondly, literacy introduced a social hierarchy in cultural consumption that not only distinguished the learned society from the illiterate, but it also hierarchized cultural consumption on the basis of the products. Research on the popular «blue books» has shown that since the beginning of the printing industries there was a division between highbrow and lowbrow literature [Chartier, 1987]. Poetry was a legitimate genre, whereas the novel was considered as a popular one (and as a feminine one), which was highly despised until it was elevated by Goethe and romanticism.

The “academization” of painting in the Seventeenth century was modelled after literature. Indeed, however, it was not until the second half of the Eighteenth century that the category of “art” emerged, unifying music, painting and “belles-lettres,” in relation to the definition of the aesthetic judgement as disinterested, which was theorized by Kant after Shaftesbury [Cassirer 1966]. As demonstrated by Woodmansee [1994], this was a means to differentiate “fine arts” from craft and commercial activities and to warn cultural producers not to sacrifice the perfection of their artwork in the name of the public’s demand, at the very moment when a market of symbolic goods was emerging. This is the beginning of the autonomization process described by Bourdieu in *The Rules of Art* [Bourdieu 1992].

Thus the hierarchization of cultural consumption according to the mode of consumption appeared, at least in Germany, in the late Eighteenth century. By the mid-Nineteenth century, with the industrialization of book production and the broadening of readership, it had become a common classificatory scheme in France. In the literary trials on which I am currently working [Sapiro 2007], a distinction prevailed between the mode of consumption of the educated elite, who was assumed to be able to distance itself, and the supposedly non-distanced approach of the new readers (working classes, women, youth), an approach illustrated by Emma Bovary's way of reading in Flaubert's novel. Thus the "noxious" intentions of the author and his publisher were judged according to the format of the book and its price, taken as indicators of the public targeted.

Lizardo is right in emphasizing the role of the educational system in institutionalizing and transmitting the aesthetical dispositions forged by writers, artists and critics (Bourdieu highlights the fact that writers first developed their specific criteria through art criticism). But we should keep in mind that the educational system was itself hierarchized: in France, while the republican 1881 law made primary education free and compulsory, until the 1930s secondary education remained the prerogative of a small elite whose parents could pay for admission, with the exception of a few scholarships allocated to brilliant children from lower social classes (1% of boys in each generation got the baccalauréat by the turn of the Twentieth century). The opening of high schools to children of all social classes in the 1930s then contributed to the emergence, after the war, of a larger educated class, although hierarchy in the educational system did not disappear, as shown by sociologists of education [Bourdieu and Passeron 1964; Baudelot and Establet 1971].

The second point about the educational system is that only literature is taught in a systematic and theoretical way (music, painting and dance are taught in a more practical way). Thus literature plays again a paradigmatic role. Recent research on reading practices has highlighted the distinction between "ordinary reading" and "aesthetic reading." A longitudinal survey on young readers shows that school has the highest impact on taste making and on judging criteria, more than social origin or gender [Baudelot, Cartier and Detrez 1999]. "Ordinary reading" prevails until the lycée. It is only at this stage (i.e. the last three years of high school) that pupils begin to embody the aesthetic criteria of judgment (form, style, composition): the "good" pupils change their way of speaking about literature from that moment on. The successive reforms that have taken place in the way of teaching literature should, of course, be taken into account in understanding the evolution of the norms of aesthetic judgement.

As the hierarchy within the educational system has changed, the hierarchy within cultural goods is also not immobile. Thus the common assumption that the rigid

boundary between fine arts and popular culture was eroded after WWII should be questioned. The avant-garde in the first half of the Twentieth century borrowed many elements from folk and popular culture, as a way of distinguishing itself from the legitimate culture taught at school: Duchamp transformed ready-mades into artworks, the surrealists admired Fantômas, Bartok borrowed themes from folk music. The institutionalization of such attempts after WWII is linked to the enlargement of the public for art and to the development of cultural policy, which was based on an alliance with professional artists (against the cultural industries and the amateurs). The social and cultural status of the cultural goods themselves, however, changed. Literature was a model for the legitimization of the other arts, as already argued about painting. Lizardo brings the example of cinema. The «cinema d'auteur» was highly inspired from the literary model [Duval and Mary 2006]. The emergence of criticism, specialized journals, classics, reference to its own history, are the signs of such a legitimization process, differentiating what came to be considered as artworks from the industry of entertainment. Such a process occurred not only in cinema, but also in musical genres like jazz, and even rock or punk, which are now gaining recognition and entering the repertoire of classical concert halls (the salle Pleyel in Paris, for instance; on the application of a rhetoric derived from classical music to rock classic albums live, see Bennett, forthcoming). This process, which is probably also a result of what Lizardo defines as an “embodied cultural capital regime,” means that the scholarly distinction between fine arts and popular culture, which is often applied mechanically without being questioned, needs to be revised.

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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: sociology of culture, cultural consumption, cultural capital, aesthetic judgement, cultural legitimacy.

Gisèle Sapiro is a research director at the CNRS (Centre de sociologie européenne, Paris). Her publications include a book on French writers during World War II, *La Guerre des écrivains, 1940-1953* (Fayard, 1999), and many articles on sociology of literature, sociology of intellectuals and sociology of translation. She also edited or coedited three books, *Pour une histoire des sciences sociales, Pierre Bourdieu, sociologue* (both Fayard, 2004), *Translatio. Le marché de la traduction en France à l'heure de la mondialisation* (CNRS Editions, 2008), and five special issues of journals: on literary translation, on international circulation of ideas (*Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* 144 and 145, 2002), on socialist realism (*Sociétés & Représentations*, 15, 2002), on the organization of intellectual professions (*Mouvement social*, 214, 2006), on artistic vocation (*Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, 168, 2007). Forthcoming in 2009: *Les Contradictions de la globalisation éditoriale* (Nouveau monde editions).