

Frank Trentmann

Comment on Omar Lizardo/4

(doi: 10.2383/27713)

Sociologica (ISSN 1971-8853)

Fascicolo 2, settembre-ottobre 2008

Ente di afferenza:

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Comment on Omar Lizardo/4

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doi: 10.2383/27713

How the consumption of cultural goods is related to the production of status is a question as important today as when Pierre Bourdieu turned to it in the 1960s and 1970s. Since then, most work on consumption has moved away from the classical sociological concerns with class, status, and power to more decidedly culturalist questions of identity, self, and transgression. I want to start my comment therefore with a note of appreciation for Omar Lizardo and his ambition to reconnect social stratification and cultural consumption. These are questions at the forefront of current policies of funding in the arts and strategies seeking to tackle social exclusion through cultural inclusion. What is noteworthy about Lizardo's paper, however, is a rare recognition that our position today is part of a much longer history – and that to provide effective answers, sociologists need to engage with that longer historical development.

The main contribution of the paper, in my view, is to stretch the chronological terms of the debate. This has tended to be concerned either with Bourdieu's own time – was his analysis correct for 1960s France (really Paris and Lille)? Or it has been asked to what degree his method is still useful for late modern life-style societies today. Lizardo is useful in shifting the focus away from the 1960s – a kind of intellectual wall in most social science inquiries into consumer culture –, and asking instead about the longer history of cultural consumption and status. Here is an applied Bourdieuan view of history. The question is: how well does it hold up as history?

Lizardo uses Bourdieu to draw a sharp distinction between the *direct or exclusive appropriation* of works of art and the *indirect appropriation* of symbolic goods. The first effectively refers to ownership and money: how many goods do social groups own? The second concerns aesthetic disposition: do you have the “right” view of cultural goods and can you talk appropriately about them? Lizardo argues that there is a fundamental shift from the former to the latter, and that this shift happens in the Nineteenth century. He finds a “systematic transition in the cultural stratification system of the Euro-American West starting in Renaissance Europe from a regime premised primarily on the differential ability to *own* objectified cultural products – with a contemporaneous “relative democracy” of the ability to appropriate cultural works symbolically – to a cultural stratification regime which devalued the *sole* deployment of the direct appropriation strategy and which emphasizes symbolic appropriation.” In the course of the Nineteenth century, a new regime of cultural stratification emerged in which indirect appropriation became “the primary way in which position in the stratification system became linked to lifestyle practices and back to systems of cultural goods production.”

There are methodological questions whether “direct” and “indirect” forms of appropriation should be viewed in such separate terms, let alone in an implied rivalry; the spread of indirect forms of accumulating cultural capital may have made direct forms and economic capital more, not less important (a closer look at educational systems in some countries, for example, might point to housing equity and private school fees). Other studies of material culture show that personal possessions and collections remain vital sources of identity for many people today. However, I want to limit myself to some historical observations.

The first is that (to a historian’s eye) history features in this piece in two enormously large undifferentiated blocks of time and space. There is the “Euro-American West” of what Lizardo calls “early modernity,” by which he means the Renaissance to the early Nineteenth century. Then there is modernity. The “early modern” West is dominated by direct modes of appropriation, later modernity by indirect modes. What causes this shift between rival paradigms of power and culture is, according to Lizardo, a train of events: the industrial revolution, which brings forth an ambitious status-hungry bourgeoisie, the rise of art as an autonomous field, and an educational apparatus that recycles the uneven distribution of newly acquired forms of aesthetic perception and performance. My problems are both with the stark contrast between these eras and with the presumed logic or causation of change between them.

How solid and uniform was cultural consumption in Europe between the Fifteenth and Nineteenth centuries? Given Lizardo’s concern to avoid the trap of a

simple homology between unidimensional hierarchies of power and taste, there is remarkably little differentiation here between diverse forms of cultural consumption or between social groups across what are huge swaths of time.¹ Lizardo writes that the “key characteristic of the early modern regime of cultural stratification is that while art *objects* were relatively scarce and therefore unequally distributed by class, *the schemes of perception and appreciation* applicable to those objects, and by implication the stylistic devices used by artists, were drawn from a ‘cultural repertoire’ (...) that was widely *shared* across social groups. From the largely illiterate agricultural laborers and semi-skilled urban craftsmen to the richest merchants and most powerful members of renaissance courts”.

To what degree such a statement is true or wrong depends a good deal on where we are in Europe, when, and what form of cultural consumption we are looking at. Clearly, there were some cultural domains that were shared, ranging from the church to cock-fighting. In Seventeenth century England, some art forms like the theatre were particularly open to diverse social groups – whether such shared practices should be called “democratic” is another matter. However, their openness is no evidence that different groups viewed *Measure for Measure* with the same “scheme of perception and appreciation.” Plays were written in different registers, allowing for different forms of perception and engagement.

Popular ownership of art objects varied enormously across European societies, well into the Twentieth century. Pictures were scarce in central European households, but already by the early Eighteenth century artisans in London owned woodcuts and engravings; woodcuts could be bought for a penny or two. It offers a far too static picture of cultural consumption before the nineteenth century.

It was precisely the growing proliferation and desire for goods in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth century that set in motion debates about “luxury.” These were about the ownership of goods. But they were also tied to ideas about the appropriate forms of appreciating and engaging with cultural forms. “Politeness” was not a cultural repertoire shared by everyone: it was something that had to be learnt and cultivated. The language of “decorum” provided a register of aesthetics and appropriate behaviour that corresponded with status. And, in the early Eighteenth century, magazines like *The Spectator* guided its readers in the art of developing the “pleasures of the imagination” and new forms of aesthetic appropriation. Such highly stratified forms of taste counselling shaped the process of cultural production and consump-

¹ There is, equally, no self-evident reason why we should presume that “Europe-America-West” continues to have the same status regime of cultural consumption. Some societies in this triangle might have more differentiated, others more homogenous consumption practices, as suggested by recent research by Southerton *et al.* [2006] and Warde *et al.* [2007].

tion alike, such as in the craze for formal gardens or the demonstration of sympathy when reading out diaries and literature [Brewer 2000]. It is difficult to think of aesthetic dispositions that were more embodied markers of status.

In other words, ownership of goods has been interwoven with stratified systems of indirect appropriation well before the Nineteenth century. The centrality of classical reference points in Renaissance art, suggests that groups with classical training would have viewed and talked about statues, paintings, and literary references in quite a different way than those without. Conversely, plebeian groups had their own customary field of cultural activity, with their own codes of appropriate dress and behaviour [Styles 2007]. These worlds were not hermetically sealed from each other. There were overlaps, shared predispositions, and mutual appropriations (carnival, cockfighting). But there were also cultural fields and predispositions which were group specific.

Let us next turn to the implied unitary nature of works of art. Why presume a shared historical pattern for quite different cultural goods? Music, for example, is not like theatre. If theatre was more open, opera around 1700 was very exclusive. Opera was expensive to produce – costs could run into several thousand pounds per production. In London, Italian opera was an exclusive craze that created something like an early star system – leading foreign singers could attract 1,500 pounds per season. One recent historian has described it as a “form of conspicuous consumption.” Here was a cultural field in direct tension with the more “natural” repertoire of cultural feeling aimed at the middling sort – Steele (of *The Spectator*), in a classic line, ridiculed the castrati for being “every way impotent to please” [Hoppitt 2000, 450].

Cultural consumption in Lizardo’s paper interlocks with status directly, unpoluted by ideologies or other collective identities. The problem is that cultural consumption is rarely that pure. The battle between Italian opera and English music, to stay with our example, was part of a larger conflict between social groups and their competing cosmopolitan and national values and points of reference. William Hogarth understood this. He championed the more “nationalist” tastes of his middle class audience, mocking the cosmopolitan taste of the aristocracy. To survive, the aristocratic elite eventually had to nationalise its life-style, adopting national pastimes and cultural pursuits. It is problematic to see divisions in cultural tastes connected to class as an entirely novel product of the highbrow/lowbrow regime of the late nineteenth century; Lizardo grants that the absolutist court had a separate taste regime but sees its “societal penetration [...as] almost nil.” Any attempt to map cultural consumption onto status will be flawed without due attention to the competing ideologies and value systems such as nationality or religion which favour certain cultural repertoires over others.

The bourgeois revolution and the development of art as a “separate field” work in tandem in Lizardo’s thesis. The rigidity of the old cultural regime, he argues, was first broken up in the post-Napoleonic period (post-1815), which saw industrialisation, an “enhancement in overall wealth,” and the spread of markets in Western Europe. This led to what historians have dubbed a veritable “consumer revolution.” In turn, this released the bourgeoisie from the *ancien regime* of cultural consumption. And this created a new space for art as an autonomous field which was vital for the growing importance of embodied cultural capital. Given the importance of long-term causation for his argument it is unfortunate that the basic chronology is so twisted – historians introduced the idea of the “consumer revolution” as a way to explain the industrial revolution, not the other way around, and most scholars have emphasized constant (not rising) standard of living during industrialisation.

Even more important here, perhaps, is the strong association between the rise of the bourgeoisie and the rise of the independent artist. Bourgeoisie, art, and the importance of status-differentiated forms of symbolic appropriation come all as part of a “modernity” package, just as aristocracy, a focus on possessions, and status-undifferentiated lifestyles bear the stamp of “early modernity.” This is, of course, within a venerable tradition of seeing social classes carrying the ethos of different ages in their bosom. But it also carries with it huge assumptions about class-specific and fairly homogenous social forms of behaviour that are not always easy to reconcile with the historical evidence.

Let me provide two short examples. The first is about the middle classes and the aristocracy in late Seventeenth and Eighteenth-century Europe. This is when public concerts began to spread – the first concert to which members of the public were admitted (against a fee) was in London in 1672. The commercialisation of music now took off, including scores, instruments, music teaching, and, above all, the rise of the artist as a relatively independent professional producer of culture. In the German states already in the 1780s there were music journals that provided its subscribers with aesthetic yardsticks for the reception of new styles [North 2003, 163-165]. The question is what drove this process? Clearly, there were many merchants, doctors, and lawyers amongst the list of subscribers to the new music academies and subscription concerns in the Eighteenth century. But aristocratic patronage remained equally important. To thrive, composers like Haydn needed both networks. On its own, however, social audience, cannot explain the shifting field of cultural production. As one of the leading historians of European culture in this period has put it, there is a “plethora of evidence which suggests that many artists believed they were free agents, working not in the world of commerce but in an autonomous realm of free creativity” [Blanning 2002, 169].

My final remark concerns working class cultures. The working classes occupy a curious place in sociological studies of cultural consumption. In *Distinction* Bourdieu draws a strong contrast between bourgeois taste and a materially tied-down working class habitus. Lizardo is rightly critical of the literature on “mass society,” but the working classes are otherwise largely absent from his story. A reader can imagine them as implied victims of a new cultural regime of symbolic appropriation which, via the education system, is controlled by their middle class superiors. But otherwise they do not appear to have much of a role. We have already noted that artisans, servants, and workers also played an active part in an expanding commercial system of consumption in the eighteenth century. Equally, we should recognise that working class culture itself was stratified. Alongside readers who read barely if ever, there were vibrant pockets of intense cultural performance. As studies of reading habits in late Nineteenth and early Twentieth century Britain have shown, tastes and habits were differentiated within as well as across classes [Rose 2002]. Likewise, the European middle classes have been shown to be highly diverse, with different attitudes to wealth, power, the old elite, religion and science. Such knowledge of internal differentiation suggests the need for more nuanced, less class-specific and socially more open questions about status and cultural consumption.

In the last decade or so, historians have developed a distaste for “revolutions.” First came doubts that industrialisation ever amounted to an “Industrial Revolution.” Then, its twin “the Consumer Revolution” fared a similar fate. Concepts like “bourgeois revolution” have been no more fortunate. It is, perhaps, ironic that sociologists now turning to history to think afresh about the long-term dynamics of stratification are reinserting a revolutionary break between an early modern cultural regime and modernity. History, like all disciplines, has its fashionable cycles. And it may well be that in the next generation, “revolutionary” breaks between social systems will fight a come-back. In the meantime, we should acknowledge the much more gradual and fluid relations between periods, social groups, and cultures that recent research has brought to light. The symbolic appropriation of culture and its effect on stratification may be older than we think.

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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: consumption, Bourdieu, social stratification, Lizardo.

Frank Trentmann teaches History at Birkbeck College, University of London. His work focuses on consumption, civil society, and political culture in the modern period. He was Director of the £5 million Cultures of Consumption research programme, co-funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC). His recent publications include [Free Trade Nation: Consumption, Civil Society and Commerce in Modern Britain](#) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008) and *Food and Globalization: Consumption, Markets and Politics in the Modern World*, edited with Alexander Nützenadel, (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2008).