

Omar Lizardo

The Question of Culture and Stratification Revisited: A Response to the Comments

(doi: 10.2383/27736)

Sociologica (ISSN 1971-8853)

Fascicolo 2, settembre-ottobre 2008

Ente di afferenza:

()

Copyright © by Società editrice il Mulino, Bologna. Tutti i diritti sono riservati.
Per altre informazioni si veda <https://www.rivisteweb.it>

Licenza d'uso

Questo articolo è reso disponibile con licenza CC BY NC ND. Per altre informazioni si veda <https://www.rivisteweb.it/>

“The Question of Culture and Stratification Revisited”: A Response to the Comments

by Omar Lizardo

doi: 10.2383/27736

I am very excited to have had four highly distinguished scholars take some time to comment on my paper. I am also glad that they found the argument stimulating and generative of as many new questions as the ones that it tried to address. I think that this last consequence is especially welcome, as the last thing that I wanted to do was to offer some sort of “last word” of what is a continually evolving (and for that reason intellectually fascinating) subject. Finally, I very much welcome the keen, intellectually stimulating, and substantively important qualifications of the general argument proposed by all commenters. To make matters simple and tractable I will address only the most general thrust of the comments. I believe that the all four commenters are correct in two general respects: 1) the somewhat static way in which the argument is presented, and 2) the overly generalized historical sequencing of the changes that I describe. I must preemptively apologize to my more historically minded interlocutors, as I do not have the space (or expertise) to fully address their very nuanced and enlightening suggestions in this response.

In a certain sense, the second issue is the easiest to deal with so I will start with it: I am in complete agreement with all commenters in thinking that the general argument would have to be modified (possibly in some critical respects), in order to fit more specific national situations and historical trajectories. More specifically, we should expect to see cross-national variation both in terms of the continuing vitality of earlier taste regimes and in terms of the relative influence of the more recent “embodied cultural capital” regime. In particular, the question of variations in the

timing of some of the changes that I describe (e.g. Ollivier's perceptive suggestion of the much earlier emergence of an "artist's point of view" in the Netherlands in comparison to France or Trentmann's point that "ownership of goods has been interwoven with stratified systems of indirect appropriation well before the Nineteenth century") becomes important. For instance, organizational theories of early "imprinting" [Stinchcombe 1965] leads us to expect that nations in which the traditionally aristocratic taste regime was institutionalized first should also be the ones in which it continues to have the most strength. In the very same way, we should find that countries in which mass education has been most thoroughly supported as a state-led project – e.g. social-democratic welfare state regimes – should also be the ones in which the generalized aesthetic appreciation of popular and folk cultures (including "global culture") should be the most widespread.

In this respect I would like to make a rather more general claim regarding the theoretical status of national specificities and their import for arguments of the sort that I am trying to make. I believe that rather than using idiosyncratic national histories or historical periods to claim them as "particularizing" exceptions to more ambitious general arguments, we should heed Bourdieu's advice and attempt to see how each national or historical case in its full unique complexity is also "a special case of what is possible' (...) that is, (...) an exemplary case in a world of finite possible configurations" [Bourdieu 1991, 628]. Of course, this is not a plea to simply accept general arguments that are flat out wrong, or simply inapplicable to certain historical and social settings, but simply to not thoroughly discount what could be a useful analytical scheme at the first sight of historical or cross-national variation (an attitude that I think has prevented the full assimilation of Bourdieu's argument in *Distinction*, as Bourdieu [1991] himself presciently warned).

One important point to keep in mind is that any nation-specific case study of cultural stratification will probably need to depart not from a traditional case-study perspective, but will have to engage in some form of "incorporated comparison" [McMichael 1990] that is sensitive to the location of specific national histories in larger regional and transregional networks of influence. For instance, while there have been some countries that serve as focal points of institutional innovation in terms of the creation of new schemes and categories of aesthetic appreciation, once a specific institutional innovation appears on the scene (from the notion of "serious music" to the idea of *l'art pour l'art*) it invariably diffuses throughout the system. Thus, while DiMaggio's seminal study [DiMaggio 1991] is usually not presented as such, it is clear that in addition to being an analysis of "institutional entrepreneurship" it is also an account of the transatlantic *transfer* of specific ideologies of high art developed in Europe to the American scene.

In some other cases, the nation-centered approach is more limited because some of the most important revolutionary movements that have brought with it a new sensibility (and with it a new set of corporal and cognitive schemes with which to appropriate aesthetic objects as Dowd points out) are inherently transnational (such as modernism). The fact that educational systems have become such central institutions in imparting the schemes of perception and appreciation necessary to engage in cultural appreciation in the contemporary regime is also crucial, because educational systems tend to evince high levels of isomorphism across national boundaries [Meyer *et al.* 1997]. That means such emerging embodied forms of aesthetic consumption and appreciation as Ollivier's "humanistic" openness to cultural diversity [Ollivier 2008] or Regev's "aesthetic cosmopolitanism" [Regev 2007] may evince high levels of commonality *across* nations within educated strata, even as they serve as markers of status-linked difference *within* nations.

Going back to the first issue, related to the concerns with 1) the rather static presentation of the various institutional transformations that form the core of the argument of the paper (a point raised most forcefully by Dowd); 2) a defocalizing of the role of status-linked conflict *within* fractions of the dominant class in the creation of the "embodied cultural capital" regime (a point articulated by Ollivier); 3) the relative neglect of the role of other sites of the production of symbolic goods and discourses about those goods, such as literature (a fascinating point developed in Shapiro's comment); and 4) the lack of attention to differences in consumption styles across different social groups – including paying very little attention to working class styles of consumption – across really big "swaths of time" (a point emphasized by Trentmann), I must plead guilty as charged on all four counts.

The lack of historical dynamism as well as lack of attention to actors and more micro-level dynamics of institutional transformation (as well as the – unintended! – portrayal of the various regimes as so many Foucauldian epistemes following one another in discontinuous fashion) in my account is certainly troubling, and I would like to forcefully say that I agree with Trentmann and Dowd that a more thorough exposition would certainly have to include a more conjunctural (and "eventful") portrayal of these dynamics. This would require as Trentmann notes the acknowledgment of a "much more gradual and fluid relations between periods, social groups, and cultures." In addition, as emphasized by Dowd, this more detailed account would have to be more attentive to the historically situated role of institutional actors and to the complex, and sometimes counter-intuitive, functions that the market for commercial art plays in the process of institutional transition from one taste-regime to another. For instance, Trentmann (rightly) points out that the increasing availability of luxury and consumer goods across class strata in the way of the consumer revolution in

England, naturally led to debates about the *proper way* to appropriate these goods. In this case the market produces an oversupply of material goods and a relative democratization of the ability to directly appropriate them, which leads to the creation of a demand for new sources of "scarcity" which can no longer be traced to simple ownership but now require embodied "ownership" of different forms of sensibility. Thus, it is crucial to look at the emergence and diffusion of new taste-regimes as problematic accomplishments on the part of institutional entrepreneurs (variations in the relative success of whom create cross-national variations in the relative strength of older and emergent forms of aesthetic appreciation).

One point in particular raised by both Dowd and Trentmann I think deserve a more thorough assessment that I can provide here, but I still think it is worth mentioning: the historically contingent nature of the oppositional relationship between the "direct" and "indirect" mode appropriation of cultural works. Trentmann notes that "[t]here are methodological questions whether "direct" and "indirect" forms of appropriation should be viewed in such separate terms, let alone in an implied rivalry." Dowd on the other hands suggests that this opposition may be changing in character in the wake of the emergence of more affordable and widely available forms of objectification.

I think these are very important issues. First, Trentmann is correct to note whether the two modes appropriation are "oppositional" or not is itself historically contingent. In my argument, this opposition is itself the institutional consequence of the rise of schooling as the primary way in which the aesthetic disposition is defined and transmitted, which pits different class fractions and different modes of appropriation against one another depending on the type of relationship that these class fractions have vis a vis the educational system. Dowd's nod toward new studies of the different forms of digital and mechanical reproduction of cultural goods is also apposite – as every one of us who has a friend with hundreds of thousands of songs in their Ipod can attest. My sense is that "mass" access to objectified cultural works, actually serves to increase the relative value of embodied aesthetic dispositions. So the "new type of role" that direct appropriation may have acquired in the current system, may be increasingly "complementary" (but also increasingly devalued) rather than "competitive" in relation to embodied cultural capital. By the very same token, as "digital reproduction" makes older, (e.g. merely "mechanical" in Benjamin's sense) ways of objectifying cultural works relatively scarce, then these older objectified forms may come to regain the "aura" that they themselves stripped from traditional works of art (such as the now established orthodoxy that vinyl records simply "sound better" than CDs).

Dowd's and Trentmann's concern with the rather static and discontinuous account of change offered in the paper relates to Ollivier's point as to the lack of

emphasis on the role of *status group conflict* in terms of: 1) providing impetus for innovations at the level of styles of aesthetic appreciation and 2) in producing the sometimes complex interinstitutional linkages that determine whether new forms of aesthetic appreciation will become institutionalized or will actually disappear with very little influence (e.g. the alliance between the artistic field and higher education institutions). I believe Ollivier's nod to the notion of *horizontal* boundary drawing in producing the impetus to extend the aesthetic disposition outside of its originally prescribed realm to other symbolic goods (including those generated by the "culture industry") is a point that deserves to be strongly emphasized, as I think is crucial in bringing empirical specificity to the argument. In that respect, this is probably the main thing that I wish I could change in the paper as currently written, since it is a process that I believe is crucial in explaining cultural change. In particular, the division separating "bourgeois" and "bohemian" (and those rising class fractions that tend to combine both orientations in a sometimes uneasy balancing act) is of primary importance. If this account is correct, we should expect that "openness to cultural diversity" should not only be the purview of the educated class, but *within* the educated stratum to be more likely to be deployed by those groups whose main claim to status rests on cultural capital as Ollivier suggests.

Sapiro zeroes in on the literary field as one of the original models for the emergence of an "aristocratic" highbrow regime of transcendent art. Her account is related to Trentmann's objection that my account presumes a single "unitary pattern" of appreciation for different art forms. I find Sapiro's suggestion of the effect of literary forms of appreciation on subsequently structured artistic fields a suggestive hypothesis; although I must admit that a serious consideration of this issue would stretch my competence even more than it has already been stretched. I find thoroughly convincing Sapiro's argument that centralizing monarchs and state elite made much of national literatures (and the connection between the nation and European vernaculars) (it dovetails nicely with Benedict Anderson's similar argument in the case of nationalizing elites). I would also tend to agree with Sapiro's point that while changes that are analogous to the ones that I focus on occur in literature, their timing does not quite correspond to those observed in music, painting and the performing arts, since they tend to happen much earlier.

This is something that I only pointed out in passing in the paper in the case of class differences in embodied dispositions (for instance, the early emergence of a literate class meant that segmentation of audiences on the basis of an embodied scheme existed in early modernity), but which Sapiro also shows applies to the structuration of a specifically autonomous field of "artistic literature." Thus, Sapiro notes that the "academization" of painting in France used as an institutional blueprint the *previous*

academization of literature as art that deserved state support. This is an important point, as it notes the existence of previous institutional models for how to "build" an autonomous artistic field beyond that provided by the French dealer-critic system, which would entail a revision of the argument that I proposed. Thus, literature seems to emerge as an important institutional model both chronologically and in terms of actual historical impact on other artistic fields, yet, it appears that the primary modes of aesthetic appreciation dominant today draw very little on specifically "literary" discourse. How to deal with this apparent conundrum? One interesting characteristic of literature is the fact that reading itself (for obvious reasons) has always been more directly tied to *explicit* and formal academic training (as pointed out by Sapiro). Reading was always the mark of the "classical culture" of medieval and early modern Europe, a culture that has always been distinct from "popular culture" even before there was a division between elite and non-elite cultural forms in the general populace [Burke 2008].

In contrast to those dispositions related to reading, which have always been part of the scholastic institution, those associated with the other arts are relatively more difficult to explicitly formalize and thus always remain relatively more dependent on "informal" training in status-linked environments (this is a hypothesis that Bourdieu proposes in *Distinction*) in *addition* to more explicit training in school systems. This relatively tight linkage to explicitly formal, domain-specific educational training might be the reason why the aesthetic appreciation schemes connected to literature appear to be less capable of providing a more "generalized" disposition capable of being extended to a wider range of symbolic goods in comparison to those connected to audio-visual consumption (or even cuisine!). This is even as the timing the development, intellectualization and societal penetration of explicitly literary schemes precede those associated the audiovisual arts. In that respect the relative decline of "print" [Anderson 1991] and its partial replacement by "audiovisual" [Appadurai 2008] capitalism (and possibly "gustatory capitalism"?), may carry much more import than we have so far realized.

In all, I would like to close by thanking all four authors and the editors of *Sociologica* for taking the time and providing the opportunity to engage in this exchange. I hope this will be only the beginning of what should prove to be an ongoing conversation.

References

- Anderson, B.
1991 *Imagined Communities*. New York: Verso.
- Appadurai, A.
2008 "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy." Pp. 47-65 in *The Anthropology of Globalization*, edited by J.X. Inda and R. Rosaldo. Malden: Blackwell.
- Bourdieu, P.
1991 "First Lecture. Social Space and Symbolic Space: Introduction to a Japanese Reading of Distinction." *Poetics Today* 12: 627-638.
- Burke, P.
2008 *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe*. ACLS Humanities E-Book.
- DiMaggio, P.
1991 "Cultural Entrepreneurship in Nineteenth-Century Boston: The Creation of an Organizational Base for High Culture in America." Pp. 374-397 in *Rethinking Popular Culture*, edited by C. Mukerji and M. Schudson. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- McMichael, P.
1990 "Incorporating Comparison within a World-Historical Perspective: An Alternative Comparative Method." *American Sociological Review* 55: 385-397.
- Meyer, J.W., Boli, J., Thomas, G.M., and Ramirez, F.O.
1997 "World Society and the Nation-State." *American Journal of Sociology* 103: 144-181.
- Ollivier, M.
2008 "Modes of openness to cultural diversity: Humanist, populist, practical, and indifferent." *Poetics* 36: 120-147.
- Regev, M.
2007 "Cultural Uniqueness and Aesthetic Cosmopolitanism." *European Journal of Social Theory* 10: 123-138.
- Stinchcombe, A.L.
1965 "Social Structure and Organizations." Pp. 142-193 in *Handbook of Organizations*, edited by J.G. March. Chicago: Rand McNally.

"The Question of Culture and Stratification Revisited": A Response to the Comments

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: arts consumption, Bourdieu, social stratification, cultural capital, fields of cultural production.

Omar Lizardo received his PhD from the University of Arizona in 2006 and is currently an Assistant Professor in the Department of Sociology at University of Notre Dame. His primary research interests are the sociology of culture, the sociology of knowledge, sociological theory and world systems theory. In a recently published paper he dealt with the effect of cultural tastes on the composition of social networks (*American Sociological Review*, 2006). He is currently working on an extension and elaboration of contemporary theories of culture consumption geared toward the understanding of transnational patterns of cultural trade. Additional work in progress deals with the question of the role of cultural capital in the creation of social capital and on the instrumental use of social ties.