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Democracy, Distinction and Power in Omnivorous Gourmet Food Culture. A Response to Shyon Baumann and José Johnston

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Democracy, Distinction and Power in Omnivorous Gourmet Food Culture

A Response to Shyon Baumann and Josée Johnston

by Therese Andrews

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I appreciate Baumann and Johnston's response to my article, and I hope that our academic debate on gourmet food culture and distinction processes contributes to move the sociology of culture, as a research field, a step forward.

Over the past century, a number of social scientists have demonstrated the ways in which food and eating patterns are socially regulated and distributed. More recent patterns, such as the pattern Johnston and Baumann look into, are underexplored and of this reason their study adds valuable insight into the food landscape. Their study also adds to studies of lifestyle discourses, how these are shaped, maintained or changed.

Nevertheless, aspects of Johnston and Baumann's article from 2007 are debatable, as are aspects of their response to the critique that I raised. For some reason Baumann and Johnston elaborate on findings from their research which I found convincing and well documented, which I also acknowledged, namely the tension between democracy and distinction embedded in the discourse (cf. Question #1). Identification of this particular tension is of clear sociological relevance and worth drawing attention to, although distinction processes may be interpreted differently. I wish, however, that Baumann and Johnston had taken the opportunity to better clarify their position on the issues on which we seem to disagree (and here I do not refer to several misunderstandings in their reading of my original text).

One of two main points in my article was of an epistemological nature: What kinds of conclusions are reasonable to draw from a sociological study of gourmet

food journalism? More specifically: is it reasonable to draw a line from writing to practices in the way Johnston and Baumann [2007, 165] do when they, based on analysis of gourmet food magazines, in the paper's abstract, for instance, state that: "This article advances our understanding of how cultural consumption sustains status distinction [...]"? Rather than discussing this issue from a philosophy of science perspective Baumann and Johnston justify their claims on consumption by referring to i) their own subsequent study of foodie discourses and practices; ii) works on cultural consumption and omnivorous taste within genres such as music, literature, movies etc.; and iii) prior studies on aspects of food where the main focus differs from theirs. Several studies indicate discrepancy between cultural practices, and in many respects food varies in nature from that of for instance music. Thus, findings on preferences for the latter cultural genre do not necessarily apply to food [see also e.g. Bourdieu 1984; Gartman 1991]. Legitimizing unsound conclusions by referring to subsequent studies or to studies of different subject matters are questionable, indeed. It is beyond the scope of my reflections here to comment on whether it is reasonable to make claims on social inequality on a global level based on a study of omnivore gourmet food writing and a study of foodie practices in the US, as Baumann and Johnston attempt to do when talking about significations of their work (cf. Question #4) [for a related methodological discussion, see e.g. Payne and Williams 2005].

The second issue on which my sociological position differs from that of Johnston and Baumann [2007] and Baumann and Johnston in their present response, concerns what to make of an uneven distribution of taste. No doubt, taste varies. This is documented in numerous empirical studies including my own [e.g. Andrews 2006]. Disagreement within this research field concerns, for instance, the axes along which taste varies i.e. whether taste differences mainly follow a vertically demarcation dline, between social "classes," or also follow other important axes. If certain tastes happen to be distributed according to social location or according to the structure of the social space (or along other axes), my main question is: So what? And further: In what ways do taste differences matter? What are the consequences? What is taste differences an indication of?

Baumann and Johnston's present response does not make it easier to follow their academic reasoning for why they see the concept of cultural capital appropriate for capturing the taste pattern they describe or for explaining tensions between democracy and distinction in omnivore gourmet food discourse, and particularly capture covert aspects of distinction (cf. Question #1 in their response). Although Baumann and Johnston state that cultural capital is about class domination and unequally distribution of power, it is still an open question how the authors see omnivore gourmet food taste working as a power resource in the context they have explored. In other

words, they do not disclose what kind of consequences they believe a socially distributed difference in for instance knowledge on omnivore gourmet food options, may have. Baumann and Johnston obviously avoid elaborations on the concept of power, which, indeed, is a complicated concept, but yet a core aspect of cultural capital. The relationship between culture and location in the social space is also a complicated matter, and to clarify my criticism, I shall readdress one of my initial questions: Do people who lack knowledge on the latest trends in gourmet food culture and hip eateries miss a potentially tasty meal or risk exclusion from jobs or other resources? And another question: Does social “class” make a difference in this regard? For instance: are well educated and wealthy people who know nothing about foodie discourses or “legitimate” omnivore gourmet food options, better off than are less educated people of low income? Uneven distributed access to expensive hamburgers (cf. Baumann and Johnston Question #1) was probably not among the consequences Bourdieu was concerned with in his conceptualizing on cultural capital.

I wonder if one reason for not touching explicitly on the issue of power, in their response, is that Baumann and Johnston, in line with a number of other scholars, seem to apply a more popular understanding of cultural capital than what Bourdieu outlined in some of his writing. Evidently, the concept of cultural capital has gone through a process of “inflation” in the sense that all taste differences are being referred to as a difference in cultural capital (as a sign of social status, only). A lack of explicit reasoning around the ways in which certain tastes potentially turn into other forms of capital or give rewards socially and/or economically, or works in exclusion processes, is typical for recent works within this research field. I also wonder: If there is no evidence of such effects is it still reasonable to talk about certain tastes in terms of cultural capital? Baumann and Johnston rightly assert that they do not have data to make claims on how cultural capital works on a micro-sociological scale in order to respond to my challenge, i.e. reflections on how cultural capital works (cf. Question #3). Still, they claim that the taste pattern they reveal works as cultural capital.

Finally, Baumann and Johnston assert that they cannot find a claim in their article indicating that only people of high status eat in ways prescribed by the discourse they examine, and also that I do not cite a specific page for my criticism. In fact, I do cite specific pages for this part of my criticism by referring to statements throughout the entire paper (specifically on page 173 through to page 200) that are reasonable to interpret in that direction. Johnston and Baumann [2007] also explicitly claim that their study lends support to Bourdieu’s work on distinction. They locate their work within the frame of cultural capital and draw conclusions on cultural capital. This, in turn, has some implications, and builds on some assumptions, such as homology between culture and class; origin of taste located in childhood; and definition of “le-

gitimate taste" as the taste of the dominating class. I did not find any reservations in their text which suggest that their findings support only some parts of Bourdieu's reasoning. Nor did they explicitly point to aspects where their study modifies that of Bourdieu. Their present response helped clarify their position which indicates that they do not accept "the whole package" and acknowledge that both the cultural field and the social space is much more fragmented today than in 1960s and 1970s France.

In their later works on foodie practices Johnston and Baumann may have taken the opportunity to explore more closely the nature of the relationship between the social space and the symbolic space even if this is not indicated in their response to my article.

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Democracy, Distinction and Power in Omnivorous Gourmet Food Culture

A Response to Shyon Baumann and Josée Johnston

Abstract: This article adds to current sociological debates on cultural taste and social distinction. I particularly discuss the use of cultural capital as an analytical tool for capturing and explaining aspects of distinction within contemporary gourmet food culture, and explore the possibility of whether a different conceptualization of social distinction is more fruitful for understanding some of the patterns that are uncovered. I argue, more generally, that all social gaps in cultural taste cannot be taken as indicators of unequal distribution of power in society, as some Bourdieu-inspired scholars, tend to do.

Keywords: Social distinction, gourmet food culture, cultural capital, fashion, Pierre Bourdieu, Georg Simmel.

Therese Andrews is Senior Research Fellow and holds a doctoral degree from the Department of Sociology, University of Bergen, Norway. She has published in areas such cultural sociology, sociology of health and illness, and the sociology of professions.