

THE
CULTURAL
INTERMEDIARIES
Reader

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BOURDIEU ON CULTURAL INTERMEDIARIES

... these ‘need merchants’, sellers of symbolic goods and services who always sell themselves as models and as guarantors of the value of their products, who sell so well because they believe in what they sell ... (Bourdieu, 1984: 365)

A student of cultural intermediaries is likely to be familiar with Pierre Bourdieu and – by virtue of oft-quoted passages, such as that above – some of the content of *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (1984), Bourdieu’s mammoth contribution to the sociology of cultural consumption. First published in 1979, *Distinction* presents cultural intermediaries as a group of taste makers and need merchants, whose work is part and parcel of an economy that requires the production of consuming tastes and dispositions (101¹). Although cultural intermediaries are not discussed in a level of detail commensurate with the scale of Bourdieu’s study, the popularization of Bourdieu’s concept as a focus of research owes much to academic taste makers, who framed it as one of value for scholars of cultural studies and sociology of consumption (e.g. du Gay et al., 1997; Featherstone, 1991). More recently, research on cultural intermediaries has been engaged to a greater extent with actor network theory, economic sociology and cultural economy (e.g. Callon et al., 2002, 2007; see Nixon, McFall and others in this volume). Such engagements have contributed conceptual clarity and empirical detail, but sometimes at the price of forgetting Bourdieu (cf. Hinde and Dixon, 2007).

The chapter begins with a brief discussion of Bourdieu’s larger project, and then identifies five interrelated dimensions of his account that pertain to cultural intermediaries. These five points are not exhaustive; rather, they are intended as a set of sensitizing themes and signposts, offering an invitation to return to *Distinction*.



DISTINCTION: A TASTE OF THE BIG PICTURE

Bourdieu's oeuvre was broadly concerned with the processes by which social stratification is reproduced, vis-à-vis forms of economic and cultural capital, and the pursuit of social prestige (e.g. Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977). In the case of *Distinction*, the specific focus of the research was on how social stratification is reproduced and legitimated through notions of taste, as they are expressed and enacted through consumption. The research

sought to determine how the cultivated disposition and cultural competence that are revealed in the nature of the cultural goods consumed, and in the way they are consumed, vary according to the category of agents and the area to which they are applied. (13)

The findings regarding that variance established two relationships. On the one hand, there is a close link between cultural practices (e.g. what people like to do, and how they do it) and educational capital and social origin (i.e. the amount of formal education received, and social class of parents); on the other hand, people with similar amounts of education from different social origins may be similar in what they like and do in areas of 'legitimate' culture (e.g. their views of modern art or composers – knowledge that is more readily transmitted via education) but will differ most in areas of everyday life, such as clothing, furniture and food choices (13,78, passim).

Those specific findings sit within a bigger picture: Bourdieu's conceptualization of taste (56, passim). Tastes are social; they are acquired through conditioning relative to social origin and trajectory (e.g. class position, education and upward or downward mobility), and are experienced as if they are natural and personal. Notions of 'good taste' and definitions of 'good culture' are oriented around the dominant group, but – in being socially constructed rather than inherent – are subject to negotiation by groups seeking to improve or defend their social position. Both because they are experienced as natural and because they are stratified in legitimacy relative to the dominant group's 'good' taste, expressions of taste unite people (who do and like similar things and tend to come from similar origins) but also separate them from others with unlike tastes and origins. This is true not only of the appreciation of and access to established or 'elite' culture, but also – as noted above – the quotidian culture of dressing, home decorating, cooking and so on. In sum, taste is a mechanism of social reproduction: it enables the continuation – and veils the arbitrariness – of hierarchies between and within class groups.²

With his broader argument in mind, we can make better sense of Bourdieu's interest in cultural intermediaries as those who 'perform the tasks of gentle manipulation' of tastes (365): they are both shaping tastes for particular goods and practices, and defining and defending (new class) group positions within society. The

remainder of the chapter offers a five-point primer to Bourdieu's discussion, with regard to understanding cultural intermediaries' context, location and defining attributes:

- 1 New economy, new class relations
- 2 New occupations
- 3 Taste makers
- 4 Expertise and legitimacy
- 5 Cultural capital and dispositions

As a precursor, we must bear in mind that *Distinction* was based primarily on French survey data collected in 1963 and 1967–68. The account of cultural intermediaries is thus located in a particular time and place (some of the economic and cultural parameters of which are highlighted in point one),³ but it is also a prisoner of the research design. Built into the analysis of the survey data were existing measures used by the INSEE (Institut National de la Statistique et des Études Économiques) for socio-occupational groups: cultural intermediaries (already) existed as a petite bourgeois category of occupations (505). This creates confusion with regard to cultural intermediaries: are they (simply) an INSEE socio-occupational category? Or, should they be defined by their role as taste makers? A typical Bourdieusian approach to cultural intermediaries takes the former route, locating them specifically within the new petite bourgeoisie, which

comes into its own in all the occupations involving presentation and representation (sales, marketing, advertising, public relations, fashion, decoration and so forth) and in all the institutions providing symbolic goods and services. (359)

Within that large and internally differentiated class group are cultural intermediaries, 'the most typical of whom are the producers of cultural programmes on TV and radio or the critics of "quality" newspapers and magazines and all the writer-journalists and journalist-writers' (325).

Such a definition is problematic. The work of mediating cultural forms is performed by a range of occupations, which are neither monopolized by petite bourgeois critics, nor confined to the realm of 'creative' work (e.g. Negus, 2002; Nixon and du Gay, 2002). However, if Bourdieu's use of the specific term 'cultural intermediaries' is locked to the INSEE category, his analysis of what they do – the mediation of cultural forms, the pedagogic work of shaping tastes – spans his discussion of the 'new occupations' of the new petite bourgeoisie *and* new bourgeoisie (as discussed in points two and three). This chapter adopts the wider angle lens of the 'new occupations' to read Bourdieu on cultural intermediaries, and, as such, endorses the latter route: a conceptual approach that defines cultural intermediaries by what they do (Smith Maguire and Matthews, 2010, 2012).

1. NEW ECONOMY, NEW CLASS RELATIONS

Bourdieu's analysis of cultural intermediary occupations is informed by what he regarded as a 'new economy ... whose functioning depends as much on the production of needs and consumers as on the production of goods' (310). Bourdieu was not alone in noting the expansion of a consumer economy over the 20th century and considering its consequences for the rise of a consumer culture (e.g. Lash and Urry, 1994; Slater, 1997). In this new economy, 'changes in economic production ... place ever greater emphasis on the production of needs and the artificial creation of scarcity' (369). Hence the need for needs merchants and taste makers.

Furthermore, cultural intermediaries cannot be understood outside of changes in class relations arising from the expansion of higher education. As sex- and class-based barriers to educational qualifications diminish, several things occur. There is an 'overproduction of qualifications, and [a] consequent devaluation' (147) – a process familiar to any university student today. At the same time, as access to bourgeois jobs is arguably more open (with points of entry structured through educational qualifications), competition for those jobs intensifies:

The combined effect is to encourage the creation of a large number of *semi-bourgeois* positions, produced by redefining old positions or inventing new ones, and designed to save unqualified 'inheritors' from down-classing and to provide parvenus with an approximate pay-off for their devalued qualifications. (150; see also 357, *passim*)

These new occupations are the 'refuge' of the sons and daughters of the bourgeoisie who, failing to acquire appropriate educational capital, are in danger of *déclassement*, and the sons and daughters of the petite bourgeoisie (and working class) who have acquired appropriate educational capital, but find that their expectations of upward social mobility are not matched by objective opportunities (147).

Therefore, cultural intermediary occupations are, for Bourdieu, an effect both of an economy requiring the production of need, and of class anxiety about upward and downward social mobility. It is the latter factor that attracts most of Bourdieu's attention: this strengthens his understanding of the subjective dynamics at play for the new petite bourgeoisie; however, it is also a limitation, as noted by critics who complain that Bourdieu largely ignores the institutional, political-economic context of cultural industries and the division of labour that has developed therein (e.g. Garnham, 1986)⁴. With that in mind, let us now consider Bourdieu's view of these new occupations.

2. NEW OCCUPATIONS

Bourdieu's concern was with the new, or intensified, professionalization of existing occupations (as noted by his contemporaries; e.g. Wilensky, 1964), through which

the new class fractions could distinguish themselves from their established counterparts (358). Critics have called into question the ‘newness’ of Bourdieu’s economy (as one uniquely involved in the production of cultural tastes) and cultural intermediary occupations (e.g. Nixon and du Gay, 2002); nevertheless, what is of particular use in Bourdieu’s account is the emphasis on the professionalization of occupations that mediate between the fields of production and consumption.

The redefinition of old, and invention of new, occupations is especially found in the ‘most ill-defined and professionally unstructured occupations, and in the newest sectors of cultural and artistic production, such as ... radio, TV, marketing, advertising, social science research and so on’ (151). As noted above, most of the attention in Bourdieusian cultural intermediary research has been on the new petite bourgeois occupations involved with presentation, representation and the provision of symbolic goods and services (359). In moving into these new sectors of the economy, the new petite bourgeoisie could exploit the relative lack of bureaucratization in order to match the occupations to their ambitions (359).

However, Bourdieu also discusses the new bourgeoisie, who have adapted to ‘the new mode of profit appropriation’ (311) through new occupations – in particular, executives ‘in marketing or management’ (301), and

the vendors of symbolic goods and services, the directors and executives of firms in tourism and journalism, publishing and the cinema, fashion and advertising, decoration and property development. (310–11)

These new ‘masters of the economy’ (315), in concert with the petite bourgeoisie, are the ‘vanguard’ of new tastes for goods, and a new ‘art of living’ (370–1). Yet, despite their obvious significance, there remains a lack of attention to the new bourgeois fraction of cultural intermediaries and their relationship to the new petite bourgeois occupations. While research might implicitly draw from across a class spectrum (in fashion, for example, studies of buyers as well as sales assistants: see Entwistle, 2006; Pettinger, this volume), the study of intermediaries reflects social scientists’ difficulty in gaining access to the powerful as research subjects.⁵

Both class fractions of new occupations are involved in the creation of wants. The new bourgeois cultural intermediaries are the instigators of new tastes and practices, because their profits and power are reliant on the production of needs (310). The new petite bourgeois occupations are closely aligned with their new bourgeois counterparts: they accomplish the objective orchestration between production and consumption (230, *passim*) not only because it is their paid work to do so, but also because in so doing they assuage subjective anxieties about class mobility. Thus, the new occupations reproduce both the consumer economy and the class positions of their practitioners.

Bourdieu offers a number of partial catalogues of the new occupations (e.g. 220, 310, 359, 365; 1996: 229). For example, they include:

the aesthetic and semi-aesthetic, intellectual and semi-intellectual occupations, the various consultancy services (psychology, vocational guidance, speech therapy, beauty advice, marriage counselling, diet advice and so on), the educational and para-educational occupations ... and jobs involving presentation and representation (tour organizers, hostesses ... press attachés, public relations people and so on). (152)

Such diverse lists raise the question of what cultural intermediaries have in common that defines them, and differentiates them from other occupations. This brings us to the third point.

3. TASTE MAKERS

Cultural intermediaries are defined by their work as taste makers. This is intertwined with Bourdieu's understanding of how taste operates as 'a match-maker' between people and things (243). Cultural intermediaries cannot enforce desires or purchases; rather, they create the conditions for consumers to identify their tastes in goods. At a general level, this entails what Bourdieu calls the 'ethical retooling' of consumer culture: the new class fractions pursue – and encourage others to adopt – a 'hedonistic morality of consumption, credit, spending and enjoyment' in place of an 'ascetic ethic of ... abstinence, sobriety, saving and calculation' (310). By using that new style of life to set themselves apart from the established classes, the new groups act as a 'transmission belt', pulling others into the 'new morality of pleasure as a duty' by having made it the stakes in status competition (365, 367). Bourdieu saw the new bourgeoisie and new petite bourgeoisie working in tandem as taste makers in this ethical imposition: 'the new petite bourgeoisie ... is predisposed to collaborate with total conviction in imposing the life-style handed down by the new bourgeoisie' (365).

At the same time and more immediately, cultural intermediaries attempt to construct elective affinities between goods and tastes. This involves fitting goods to existing tastes and vice versa. For example, as a young advertising executive explains: 'In my business, we're constantly classifying people, there are social classes, castes, and it's a matter of fitting a product to the right caste' (299). Through their 'symbolic imposition' (362, *passim*) of meanings, cultural intermediaries frame goods and practices so that they appear to the consumer to 'go together' with his or her taste (232). In this, cultural intermediaries do not act alone; Bourdieu notes the role of retailers, popular media and other institutions (231–2; see also 1996: 229) in assisting or channelling the perceptions and choices of consumers.

In attempting to effect this ethical and symbolic imposition, cultural intermediaries require a degree of authority – their constructed meanings and personal lifestyles must carry credibility if they are to be taken up by others. We now turn to this issue of legitimacy, which was central to Bourdieu's account (see also 1990a, 1996).

4. EXPERTISE AND LEGITIMACY

Shaping tastes and matching things to people require that cultural intermediaries frame particular practices and products as worthy of their claimed value, involving them in constructing repertoires of cultural legitimacy. Consequently, cultural intermediaries are not simply taste makers; they are *professional* taste makers and ‘authorities of legitimation’ (1990a: 96). This role implicates cultural intermediaries in the long-term struggle for dominance between different groups, which is ‘fought’ in part through definitions of good taste and the appropriate relationship to legitimate culture – a struggle that Bourdieu dates back to the 17th century (2). In the context of mid-20th century France, Bourdieu understands this struggle in terms of the new class fractions’ attempts to establish their (occupational and generational) distance from, and superiority to, their established bourgeois and petite bourgeois counterparts, via their ‘casual’ lifestyles and consuming habits (e.g. 311, 325, *passim*).

Broadly, cultural intermediaries are concerned with legitimacy on two, inter-related fronts – and in both respects, they operate within and between the sphere of the culturally legitimate (with its established norms of what is good) and the sphere of the legitimizable (1990a: 96). The first front concerns the social standing of their occupation (in relation to other more and less legitimate, competing authorities). As the new petite bourgeoisie lack an established position of authority, they pursue established channels of professionalization or ‘symbolic rehabilitation strategies’ through which, for example, the secretary is redubbed the ‘personal assistant’ (358) and the bartender the mixologist (Ocejo, this volume), whereas the new bourgeoisie derive authority from their established class position and their positions of dominance within their fields. Through professionalization strategies, ‘new’ cultural intermediary occupations will emerge, to compete over what counts as ‘good’ (or cool, prestigious, fashionable and so forth). Negotiating the precariousness of one’s expertise is arguably more pertinent to the new petite bourgeois occupations; however, the professionalization of such fields as advertising, marketing and management will also serve to reinforce the authority of the new bourgeoisie within.

The second dimension of legitimacy concerns the field within which a cultural intermediary is located (and thus the goods, practices and forms of capital associated with that field). Drawing on their knowledge of the sphere of legitimacy (furnished via educational capital and – especially for those originating in the bourgeoisie – the family), cultural intermediaries work to canonize the ‘not-yet-legitimate’ (326). One way in which this occurs is through transposing the hallmarks of established authority (such as an emphasis on mastery of abstract knowledge, and theoretical criteria for assessments of quality) on to new cultural forms. As a result, there is a strategic migration of restricted culture into the field of large-scale production (583; 1996) and a transformation of legitimate culture into middle-brow taste (327, *passim*). In this way, new cultural forms are upgraded (and subject to a mode of ‘poor man’s’ (220) connoisseurship, through which no object is seemingly too banal for aesthetic

discernment); so too are the cultural intermediaries, as masters of new forms of good taste.

The ability of a cultural intermediary to undertake the construction of legitimacy thus hinges on particular forms of capital and subjective dispositions – the personal dimension of the work, which constitutes the final point.

5. CULTURAL CAPITAL AND DISPOSITIONS

Cultural intermediaries are more than simply their occupational category. They are taste makers and legitimation authorities *because* of their personal investment in the work. Bourdieu's account suggests that there is a strong link between cultural intermediary occupations and individual practitioners' habitus, and particularly their stocks of cultural capital and subjective dispositions. This dimension of Bourdieu's account offers useful insights into the subjective dynamics that underpin the reproduction of an economy of cultural goods: dynamics which often go missing when the focus is macro- and micro-scale conventions and structures, be they institutional arrangements or market devices.

Bourdieu calls attention to the importance of class position in providing cultural intermediaries with the cultural capital and dispositions necessary to accomplish their work. Cultural intermediaries rely on their 'good manners, good taste or physical charm' (152); 'familiarity with the culture of the dominant class and a mastery of the signs and emblems of distinction and taste' (141); and 'aesthetic dispositions' and appropriate forms of 'self-presentation' (362). Such capacities are supplied most assuredly through bourgeois origins and internalized as habitus. However, education and (now) over fifty years of middle-brow, popularized forms of bourgeois culture also transmit, if less securely, the resources required for the work of an arbiter of cultural legitimacy and taste.

Bourdieu's discussion of the new petite bourgeoisie is further developed with regard to the dispositions that channel them into such occupations and provide them with crucial occupational resources. In parallel with the class anxiety noted above, there is also a perceived harmony between personal tastes and professional function and position, which gives rise to a vocational mentality (110, 240, 362, *passim*). Using a literary critic as an example, Bourdieu notes the 'elective affinity between the journalist, his paper and his readers' (240): the cultural intermediary is also his/her own ideal consumer. In typifying their market, the cultural intermediary is thus also well-placed to understand and direct it – a crucial resource for a taste maker. As a result, the literary critic writes with 'a perfect sincerity which is essential in order to be believed and therefore effective' (578). The harmony between the personal and professional generates a sincere disposition, which is fundamental to the effectiveness of the new occupations' symbolic and ethical impositions. As a result, cultural intermediaries do not experience their work as instrumental calculation because it is an

expression of their own tastes and dispositions. In short: they ‘sell so well because they believe in what they sell’ (365).

Bourdieu’s cultural intermediary seemingly arrives at an occupation with a fully-formed arsenal of tastes and dispositions that suit the job. This is problematic in that it presents a static notion of the intermediary (whose tastes and capital surely develop over the course of their work; e.g. Entwistle, 2006). It nonetheless has the benefit of casting light on how individuals inhabit these occupations and embody their intended markets, and thus on how the reproduction of consumer economies rests on the personal, affective investments of its promoters. In addition, Bourdieu paints an ideal type of cultural intermediary – sincere, vocationally-oriented, motivated by inter- or intra-class dynamics to proselytize for new tastes and needs. While this does not capture the entire complex range of positions and negotiations adopted by cultural intermediaries, it offers a set of sensitizing questions to ask, for example, of those who do not like what they sell (e.g. Kuipers, 2012), or do not like the selling of what they believe (e.g. Smith Maguire, 2008b). What are the comparative experiences (of success or failure, career trajectories and burnout) for those cultural intermediaries whose habitus does not fit the job?

This chapter suggests that *Distinction* provides not a fully-formed account, but a provocation to further examine the objective relations and subjective dynamics of taste making in contemporary consumer cultures. In closing, it should be noted that the themes outlined above continue to inform more recent new economic sociology research, and highlight areas for future research. First, recent research has more fully developed the economic and longer-term historical context of cultural intermediaries (e.g. McFall, 2004); however, the changing class dynamics that generate cultural intermediary work, and the role of cultural intermediaries in generating and legitimating new taste regimes, remain underexplored. Second, there remains strong interest in cultural intermediaries as taste makers, and growing attention to the relations between them in processes of qualification of goods (e.g. Méadel and Rabearisoa, 2001); and yet, the powerful remain under-represented in our understanding of these regimes of mediation. Third, as Bourdieu’s ‘transmission belt’ of consumption has been replaced with more empirically grounded accounts of the governmental mobilization of consumers (e.g. Moor, 2012), the material practices through which product properties and consumer desires inform each other and give rise to conventionalized points of attachments remain an unexhausted area of research.

Fourth, professionalization strategies remain central to analysing cultural intermediary occupations and the strategies by which they accomplish and reinforce their intended impacts (e.g. Kuipers, 2012); nevertheless, further attention is required to identify the range of strategies by which cultural intermediaries delimit and defend their occupational position against the ongoing emergence of new taste makers. Fifth, the subjective dimensions of cultural intermediary work remain a focus for exploring the ‘devices and dispositions’ involved in the promotion of consumption (du Gay, 2004). However, the current emphasis on conventions and

devices risks reducing the agency of market actors to routinized procedures and formulaic performances. Bourdieu's cultural intermediaries offer a point of entry to study how tastes are formed, legitimated and continue to develop. By locating market actors at the intersection of forms of economic organization, group status competition and individual mentalities, Bourdieu's account assists in keeping agency, passions, anxieties and habituations in the frame.

NOTES

- 1 Page numbers refer to *Distinction* (Bourdieu, 1984) unless otherwise noted.
- 2 *Distinction* can thus be understood as Bourdieu's elaboration on the relationship between class and status as proposed by Weber (1946b), within the context of contemporary consumer culture and the economy of cultural goods (xii).
- 3 Some have questioned whether the case of France – with its particular relationship to 'elite' culture – maps on to other societies (e.g. Garnham, 1986; Jenkins, 1992). However, Bourdieu suggested that the issue isn't the *means and stakes* (e.g. elite culture) but the *game*; thus, the findings should be 'valid ... for every stratified society' (xii).
- 4 Bourdieu would likely have viewed a request for 'better specification of the division of labour involved in mediating production and consumption' (Hesmondhalgh, 2006b: 227) as falling into the tradition of Howard Becker (1982), against whose analysis Bourdieu frames his own as one of exploring the '*objective relations* which are constitutive of the structure of the field and which orient the struggles aiming to conserve or transform it' (1996: 205).
- 5 It is telling that the interview in *Distinction* with a new bourgeois advertising executive (who derived from a bourgeois family) was enabled by a personal connection (300). Kuipers (this volume) usefully reflects on gaining access to such respondents.