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**CONSPICUOUS DISTINCTION: A READING OF VEBLEN  
AND BOURDIEU**

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## *Conspicuous distinction: a reading of Veblen and Bourdieu*

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### *Abstract*

The paper provides a comparative reading of two influential works of Veblen and Bourdieu, on cultural consumption. Approaches to consumers' taste and preferences are predominantly essentialist. However, Veblen and Bourdieu focused on the relationship between consumption and social divisions. Their views are, nonetheless, contrasting. Veblen developed a somewhat speculative approach centred on waste and conspicuous consumption as evidence for the natural quest for social honour. Bourdieu drew on empirical research to argue that culture stems from class and is related to necessity. The concepts of habitus, cultural capital and field interact to provide a complex and detailed account of different tastes emerging within different social classes. The result is a variegated social space with different statuses and an ongoing struggle for the definition of 'good' and 'bad' taste.

Key-words: conspicuous consumption; social distinction; cultural capital; field; habitus.

### **Introduction**

As part of the social and cultural dimensions of society, economic actions may be examined in very different contexts, be it the labour *market* or the behaviour of people within organisations. Eco-

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conomic actions involve and reflect social meanings, norms, values, and ideologies. In mainstream economics, however, cultural aspects are usually labelled and defined as tastes and preferences (Himmelweit et al., 2001), two thick labels seldom unpacked. Other social sciences examine and attempt to explain how culture is a constitutive component of economic behaviour. Earlier social scientists, such as Max Weber (1978), had already dwelled on the contribution of cultural elements, namely religion and rational law to the development of European rational capitalism. Money, for example, is another case in point, since historically, both the meaning and the social value of money has changed. In the past, the aristocratic order devalued money and considered it a trivial matter (Zelizer, 2002). However, the development of capitalism altered the views about money, as people became increasingly dependent upon an income to make a living. Money is, therefore, both a measure of economic value and a source of cultural meaning, especially when associated to consumption practices.

If consumption is an important economic variable, it is also central in studies of inequality and social deprivation as an essential component of social stratification. A common definition of consumption depicts it as a set of practices which reflect lifestyles, and therefore, particular social statuses. Following Weber (1978a) social status emerges as the symbolic dimension of social division and therefore of social stratification. Status divisions reflect the communal distribution of prestige by dint of lifestyle appraisal. Taken broadly, the expression “lifestyle” refers to the set of social practices associated to one’s social standing. Hence, consumption is a constituent of one’s lifestyle and thereby of social status. Veblen ([1899] 2008) and Bourdieu ([1979] 1984) also elaborated on the relationship between lifestyles and prestige or status, although in different manners. Besides the sheer destruction of goods and resources, Veblen saw consumption as the way of signalling one’s belonging to the “leisure class”, that is, the late nineteenth century-America heirs of the aristocratic culture. The expression “leisure class” includes all those who had accumulated wealth and refused to work because work lacked social dignity. In a different although related vein, Bourdieu dwelled upon social relations and on how these engender cultural and symbolic divisions in society and, in his view, consumption practices are all class practices.

This paper draws on the approaches to consumption and social divisions developed by the American economist, Thorstein Veblen and the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. The former focused on the conspicuous consumption, waste and avoidance of workmanship associated to class dominance. The latter developed a broader account focusing on class relations and their cultural and symbolic manifestations. Despite the many differences found in their works, the *Theory of the Leisure Class* ([1899] 2008) and *Distinction* ([1979] 1984) the two perspectives are related. This paper

explores how the concept of habitus, cultural capital and field enabled Bourdieu to move beyond Veblen's evolutionary views, to develop a complex and broader perspective where consumption is entangled with class and social status.

## **I Veblen's conspicuous consumption**

Veblen's best-known work, the *Theory of Leisure Class* [1899] 2008 is a 'satire of the rich classes' (Tilman, 2004) of late nineteenth century-America. Veblen discussed at length about the economic meaning of the aristocratic leisure class order that, having survived since medieval times well into the nineteenth century, managed to successfully perpetuate anachronistic social institutions. Veblen thought that they did not contribute to the common good and were therefore useless (Edgell, 2001). His perspective evolves around the distinction between craftsmanship and predation. While in the 'savage era' craftsmanship prevailed in close association to survival, technological development led to surplus production and conflict, as well as the rise of a predatory society. Veblen ([1899] 2008:14) purported that '[I]n the sequence of cultural evolution the emergence of a leisure class coincides with the beginning of ownership.' This is to say that historically, the leisure class and ownership resulted 'from the same set of economic forces', but nonetheless, in the earliest stage 'of their development they are but different aspects of the same general facts of social structure' (Veblen [1899] 2008:14). The social institutions of leisure class and ownership were components of social structure, and therefore, the meaning of leisure is beyond indolence or occasional neglect of productive activities. Moreover, ownership is more than a simple matter of market power and consumption. Veblen aimed to explain how in industrial capitalist societies the leisure class and private ownership became major social institutions, whilst neither of them favoured industrialism or the economic development of society. Their successful survival over time owed to symbolic and non-economic reasons, chiefly, the pervasive correlation between wealthy lifestyles and social honour.

Hence, private ownership emerged as an adverse institution, a source for conflict since '[w]herever the institution of private property is found, even in a slightly developed form, the economic process bears the character of a struggle between men for the possession of goods' (Veblen, [1899] 2008:15). Emulation emerged as the primary result of ownership, because 'wealth confers honour; it is an invidious distinction' (Veblen, [1899] 2008:16). Historically, as the leisure class developed and evolved, its male members engaged in activities depicted as 'exploit', which led to the decline of useful occupations, that is to say, productive activities or 'drudgery.' Drudgery refers to hard or

menial work typically involving women and lower-class men, and therefore mostly non-owners. As a result, the process that led to the institutionalisation of private ownership transformed the social meaning of possession. Ownership, then became associated to power and dominance, and originated a new sort of social division: that separating owners from non-owners. In early days, property took the form of trophy, Veblen asserts, but ‘Wealth is now itself intrinsically honourable and confers honour on its possessor’ (Veblen, [1899] 2008:18). Hence, cultural change enhanced the honorific character of inherited wealth. Hence, enjoyment of wealth that had been acquired effortlessly led to higher levels of prestige, and the likelihood of pecuniary emulation was thereby enhanced. In other words, successful competitors were those who could exhibit goods and services that had been acquired without effort. Conversely, there was little merit in acquiring goods and services through physical labouring, in which case, wealth was considered unworthy (Edgell, 2001).

In modern industrial capitalist societies, the institutionalisation of private property needed to be equated with the fact that production no longer related to subsistence. Thus the struggle for survival became a struggle for pecuniary respect. In other words, competition for the accumulation of goods envisaged gaining the esteem of the community and enhancing one’s reputation. In Veblen’s words, ‘[i]n order to gain and to hold the esteem of men it is not sufficient merely to possess wealth or power. The wealth or power must be put in evidence, for esteem is awarded only on evidence’ (Veblen [1899] 2008:21). This is to say that social esteem was unrelated to private albeit lavishing lifestyles, and instead, was associated to public demonstrations of non-industrial achievements, which nonetheless, required time, effort and resources. However, such evidences were immaterial, such as

the knowledge of the dead languages and the occult sciences; of correct spelling; of syntax and prosody; of the various forms of domestic music and other household art; of the latest properties of dress, furniture, and equipage; of games, sports, and fancy-bred animals, such as dogs and race-horses. (Veblen [1899] 2008:28)

These were typically the activities of the leisure class which allowed it to pretend to be engaged in ‘purposeful employment’ (Veblen, [1899] 2008:59), especially because a variety of activities, transactions, and even organisations emerged around such purposeless endeavours. It follows that the scope, the scale, and even the impersonal characteristic of social interaction, enhanced the symbolic value of the conspicuous consumption of goods as the prime way to demonstrate wealth and renown.

Veblen ([1899] 2008:102) resorted to apparel to elaborate further on conspicuous consumption as

no line of consumption affords a more apt illustration than expenditure on dress. It is especially the rule of the conspicuous waste of goods that finds expression in dress (...) expenditure on dress has this advantage over most other methods, that our apparel is always in evidence and affords an indication of our pecuniary standing to all observers at the first glance.

Money spent on clothing was no longer related to the need for protection. Instead, it was spent 'for the sake of a respectable appearance' (Veblen, [1899] 2008:102). In other words, apparel provided an example of 'conspicuous wasteful expression of pecuniary culture' (Edgell, 2001: 105). In the same vein, Veblen was also critical of both fashion and women's decorative role in modern society:

It grates painfully on our nerves to contemplate the necessity of any well-bred woman's earning a livelihood by useful work. It is not "woman's sphere." Her sphere is within the household, which she should "beautify," and of which she should be the "chief ornament." The male head of the household is not currently spoken of as its ornament (Veblen, [1899] 2008:109).

Upper and middle-class women were reduced to being men's conspicuous possessions. The meaning of conspicuous, the keyword of Veblen's work, does not describe the squander of large sums of money to acquire wasteful goods and services. What conspicuous best describes is that by engaging in noticeable and wasteful activities individuals did not risk their reputation or their respectability and successfully enhanced it.

Wasteful conspicuous leisure and consumption were most effective ways of displaying wealth. As a result, strategies of conspicuous leisure and conspicuous consumption affected the class structure, and soon percolated among non-leisure classes, leading to lower class people to engaged in vicarious conspicuous leisure and consumption. In other words, even those who engaged in workmanship and productive activities approved and accepted the standards of prestige and reputation that were enforced by the upper classes. This primary caused the 'assimilation of the lower classes to the type of human nature that belongs primarily to the upper classes only' (Veblen, [1899] 2008:149). The ability of the upper classes to reinforce their leisure-class culture conducted

human nature in a conservative direction, (1) by direct transmission of archaic traits, through inheritance within the class and wherever the leisure-class blood is transfused outside the class, and (2) by conserving and fortifying the traditions of the archaic regime, and so making the chances of survival of barbarian traits greater also outside the range of transfusion of leisure-class blood.  
(Veblen, ([1899] 2008:149)

Hence, the general legitimacy of the leisure-class culture across social structure favoured the political dominance of the upper classes, which were engaged in the reproduction of their conservative institutions. These bore an influence on all existing social institutions, managing to preserve

the existing maladjustment of institutions, and even favours a reversion to a somewhat more archaic scheme of life; a scheme which would be still farther out of adjustment with the exigencies of life under the existing situation even than the accredited, obsolescent scheme that has comedown from the immediate past. (Veblen, [1899] 2008:126)

The economist was convinced that leisure class values and institutions hold social and economic evolution back. Institutional change still occurred given the accumulation of traditions, knowledge and selective adaptations. As a result, the economic structure remained a dichotomy, which opposed two main types of institutions, 'serving either the invidious or the non-invidious economic interest' (Veblen, [1899] 2008:127). Evolution however is inevitable and even the unproductive and pecuniary institutions needed to evolve and to adapt to economic change in modern society, if they were to maintain the acquisition of private gain. Financial capitalism appears as a result of the works of the pecuniary class that successfully managed to shape the industrial process and thereby reinforced its culture and institutions.

Modern society as depicted in Veblen's account constituted the result of a long historical process of evolution, one that allowed the leisure class to establish itself as the ruling class. Thus, besides its effect on the economic structure, the leisure class provided the model for individuals, social values, and ways of life, under the spell of the principles of pecuniary emulation and leisure. A major evidence was the occupational hierarchy, which emerged from a division between highly reputed pecuniary occupations and low reputed industrial occupations. In Veblen's ([1899] 2008:141) words, within this hierarchy the 'leisure-class standards of good repute come in to sustain the prestige of those aptitudes that serve the invidious purpose; and the leisure-class scheme of decorous living, therefore, also furthers the survival and culture of the predatory traits.' As a consequence, 'Employments fall into a hierarchical gradation of reputability' (Veblen, [1899] 2008:141). Occupations related to ownership, followed by banking and law taken as the professions that served ownership interests, were at the top. Lawyers, for example, were depicted as

exclusively occupied with the details of predatory fraud, either in achieving or in checkmating chicanery, and success in the profession is therefore accepted as marking a large endowment of that barbarian astuteness which has always commanded men's respect and fear (Veblen, [1899] 2008:142).

Occupations directly involved in manual labour, that is to say, the set of mechanical and directly productive occupations, occupied the lower ranks of the hierarchy. Although crucial for the economy, workmanship was socially devalued and therefore deprived of prestige. However, the primeval instinct of workmanship was persisted also within the leisure class culture, but its survival was related to useless and predatory-like activities, such as sports. In modern society sports 'shade off from the basis of hostile combat, through skill, to cunning and chicanery, without its being possible to draw a line at any point' (Veblen, [1899] 2008:156). Sportive activities emulated purposefulness and mirrored ferocity, and were equally acceptable ways of acquiring good reputation for expertise. Moreover, sports were yet another way of displaying the leisure class norm of non-productivity. Thus, by emulating workmanship, as they involved physical effort and goals, sports managed to keep part of the population away from productive work. For that reason, they were among the set of 'activities of a predominantly predatory character' (Veblen, [1899] 2008:164), which were archaic surviving institutions among which one found:

the entire existing system of the distribution of wealth, together with the resulting class distinction of status; all or nearly all forms of consumption that come under the head of conspicuous waste; the status of women under the patriarchal system; and many features of the traditional creeds and devout observances, especially the esoteric expressions of the creed and the naive apprehension of received observances .

Even religion is at stake in this view, as it entailed the consumption of conspicuous items such as ceremonial garments and entailed exemption from productive labour as a result of religious rituals, religious holidays, and so forth. However, charity constituted an exception within the set of institutions, which having survived from ancient times, prevented economic efficiency in modern industrial society. Charity, along with 'the various expressions of the sense of human solidarity and sympathy' (Veblen, [1899] 2008:204) constituted a residual non-invidious element of religion, which partially mitigated the consequences of vanity fostered by the persistence of leisure class institutions. Charity was also the domain of upper-middle and upper class women. Given that the canon of the leisure class was the 'withdrawal from the industrial process', in the case of women, patriarchal institutions interdicted even the 'emulative process of accumulation' (Veblen, [1899] 2008:206). Upper class and upper-middle-class women had little alternatives to charitable and community work. However, even charity succumbed to the 'all-pervading and all-dominating primacy' (Veblen, [1899] 2008:206) of leisure class culture, which tended to undermine the manifest purpose of such efforts. To support this argument, Veblen mentions the legacies purportedly meant to improve the welfare of the community. Such legacies enabled the construction of edifices accord-



ing to the norm of conspicuous waste and expense. Thus, the objective, goal of such waste of resources was to enhance the social status of the benefactor rather than to improve the efficiency of the activities sheltered in the building.

Hence, a main trait of modern society is that consumption practices follow the tone set by the pervading cultural institutions of the dominant class. Exemption of productive work, along with conspicuous modes of waste and of consumption, constitutes the backbone of leisure class culture. Veblen established an objective relationship between social structure and class lifestyles, cultural values and ultimately, consumption practices. The acquisition of social repute and honour depended upon primarily by the ability to waste economic resources that had been acquired without effort. Some eighty years later, Pierre Bourdieu ([1979] 1984) a French sociologist also examined the relationship between social structure and economic and cultural dimensions of social life. Bourdieu analysed consumption practices and taste to show how social position and lifestyles are related. In this account, instead of a dominant class culture, one finds class cultures, as will be detailed in the following section.

## II Distinction

*'De gustibus non et disputandum'*

### Habitus, capitals and field

In *Distinction* (Bourdieu, ([1979] 1984) consumption practices and taste engender and maintain social relationships of dominance and submission (Campbell, 2005). Bourdieu's views on taste and preferences are, far more complex than those of Veblen's. Taste is the 'the uncreated source of all 'creation'' (Bourdieu, [1979] 1984:11), which is in turn related to the social conditions that produce taste. This intricate relationship between taste and the social conditions that produce it makes taste 'the area par excellence of the denial of the social.' Yet, taste is associated to education and culture 'in the sense of what which is cultivated and culture as the process of cultivating.' Despite bearing some similarities with Veblen's ([1899] 2008) views, Bourdieu built a broader and more complex theory anchored in the articulation of three primary concepts: *habitus*, capital, and field. The *habitus* is central in Bourdieu's theory because it connects the individual and social reality. In other words, it links the internal subjective structures of the individual to the external social structures that constrain individuals. Thus, the individual's subjectivity and society's objectivity are two inseparable parts of the same collective history.

Thus, the *habitus* may be defined as a principle of action produced by biographical experience (Bourdieu, 1984a). This is to say that social agents have specific systems of dispositions to act, to perceive, to think and to feel. Agents internalise and incorporate these dispositions throughout their history. For that reason, the *habitus* constitutes and manifests itself throughout a sort of practical sense, which can only be evaluated within the practical conditions of its implementation. In other words, the *habitus* constitutes a sort of practical sense that can only be evaluated within the practical conditions of its implementations. As a product of their history, individuals can engage either in reproductive or transformative strategies. However, in doing so, they project in reality the perceived external structures and thereby change social space and make history. The social agent is, therefore, a ‘collective individual or a collective individuated by the fact of embodying objective structures’ (Bourdieu, 2005: 209). In this sense, one may say that *habitus* is history embodied (López and Scott, 2000).

The *habitus* helps to understand, for example, why agents with certain social origins are able to learn etiquette rules from a very early age and do not need to adequate their behaviour later, as ‘good manners’ will be deployed ‘automatically.’ Other agents, in turn, will have to develop intentional efforts to learn such skills as how to eat properly, how to speak properly, what needs to be avoided in determined situations, and so forth. To follow Bourdieu, the *habitus* is a set of relatively stable structured and structuring dispositions that generate and structure practices and representations. As said, dispositions comprise ways of speaking, demeanour, taste, apparel, manners, and so forth. Dispositions obey to no intentional or utilitarian rules, and as a result, dispositions may be seen as natural or given. The *habitus* constitutes, in this context, ‘limited and conditioned spontaneity (Bourdieu, 2005: 209). It is relatively constant and durable and relatively independent from history. Being ‘the product of past experiences, and a whole collective and individual accumulation’ (Bourdieu, 2005: 212) understanding the *habitus* requires genetic analysis of collective history and individual history. However, being the product of history, the dispositions are adjusted according to one’s life history (Bourdieu, 1984), which unfolds across diverse fields. The concept of field provides the external structures that produce the *habitus*. It therefore designates an arena of human activity, which is recognised only by those in possession of the adequate dispositions or *habitus*.

A field can be understood as “a structured space of positions, which have attributes that can be analysed independently of the characteristics of their occupants (and are in part determined by them)” (Bourdieu, 1984a: 113). In other words, the field is an area of social activity with a particular structure comprising a network of positions, which are determined by the volume and composition of

possessed capitals, along with the state of forces ‘exerted on the whole set of [agents] engaged’ (Bourdieu, 2005: 193) in similar activities in the field. This means that within fields agents as well as organisations, occupy different positions according to the structure of possessed capitals or resources. In turn, capitals vary according to the specific fields and respective ongoing activities. Economic, cultural, social, and symbolic capitals tend to be universally dominant. Variation on volume and structure of owned capitals command one’s position within the field. Dominant positions correspond to large levels of the required capitals required by each field. However, agents themselves determine the very structure of the field. Regularities and inequalities that mark all social fields are the outcome of agents’ struggle for position, that is to say, for capitals or resources.

Hence, acting indirectly, the various types of capitals exert a structural effect on the field, because any change of the capital composition is likely to alter ‘the relative positions and the yields of all the species of capital held by others’ (Bourdieu, 2005: 194). This is why the structure of the field is marked by inequality, as capitals or resources are unequally distributed among agents. Dominant agents define field regularities and as a result, the environment and objective constraints strongly reduce the objective chances of dominated agents. As already said, capitals vary according to the specific fields, but some are generally relevant. Such is the case of economic, cultural, social and symbolic capitals, which play a role in any known social field. Bourdieu’s field theory describes the field as a domain where specific activities are produced (e.g. literature, economy, and so forth). This is to say that each field entail a specific game and specific interests, which are not reducible to the interests and to the game of other fields<sup>4</sup>. Game and interest describe the particular set of investments and especially the specific set of dispositions that each field require. For example, both the investments and dispositions of writers, thereby agents within the literary field will be different from agents operating within the economic field. What motivates a writer is likely to differ from the motivations and interests of a manager or an economist. The set of abilities as well as the way of thinking, the vision of the world will also be necessarily different. However, in every field, agents occupy different positions, which are defined around possession of different resources or capitals.

Moreover, agents operating in the same field share common interests, this is to say, they are keen to play according to the rules of the field. Thus, to enter a field is to accept the rules of the game and to share the field’s main goals. In a word, entering a field requires acceptance and belief in the very

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<sup>4</sup> Here, the word ‘game’ is unrelated to the ‘game theory,’ which presupposes rational players. In the same way, interest is free from the utilitarian connotation. Rather, game refers to any sort of social activity and interest means the willingness to embrace that activity and thereby to follow related norms and procedures.

game. In addition, agents that have developed their *habitus* within a set of objective structures that are close to the objective structures of the field (in which the *habitus* is supposed to operate), will ‘automatically’ produce the adequate behaviour. This is to say that in each field the *habitus* functions as a principle that guides practice and allows individuals to be able to know what to do and when to do, what to say, how to think, without constantly operating at a consciously level. Conversely, when the *habitus* is constituted within objective structures that are distant to those of the field where it needs to operate, there is a high likelihood that the *habitus* effect will be revealed in less adjusted behaviour or dispositions. In a word, it is in the ‘situations in which the *habitus* is not the product of its actualisation’ (Bourdieu, 2005:214) that its efficacy is clearer. Moreover, the dispositions are relatively constant because they are constituted in relatively constant social games.

Fields may therefore be described as domains of struggle over possession of capitals or power, since changing the position within a particular field entails altering the volume and composition of relevant capitals. Struggle for position, or to be precise for the possession of capitals is the same as struggling for power to dominate the rules of the game. Larger corporations are more likely to dictate the rules an industry than are smaller ones. To cope with the dominated position, smaller companies may try to expand and to increase dimension. Hence, field theory provides an interesting if not potent framework to understand and explain social reality. Field analysis has a number of methodological advantages as well. One is that it shuns the abstract explanations to human social behaviour grounded on automatic and universal effects, such as ‘social interaction’ (e.g. Granovetter, 2002), ‘general morality’ (Arrow, 1974), collective consciousness (Durkheim, [1893] 1984), or ‘rational choices’ (e.g. Coleman, 1994). Another advantage is that it avoids the production of general or universal explanations of reality. Being the domain of struggles for power or resources, the structure of fields are likely to change rapidly as reality is dynamic. Thus, knowledge about the effects and operations of a specific field requires periodic empirical analysis of the field to account for the levels of reproduction and change. The notion of field is even more powerful when equated with capitals and *habitus*.

### **Habitus and taste**

*Distinction* explores the cultural field and depicts tastes as ‘manifested preferences’ (Bourdieu, 1984: 56), which in turn can only be understood through one’s *habitus*. In other words, the *habitus* explains how tastes are generated and how they unveil one’s social origin. Taste manifests one’s *habitus*. Furthermore, agents also make choices based on tastes, and tastes and choices tend to obey

to the same objective conditions in which they have been produced. This is to say that some choices are only possible because agents have certain tastes. If I like classical music, I am likely to choose to spend Saturday evening in a concert hall, rather than in a bar or a disco. In turn, the taste for classical music is part of the *habitus*, which ‘comes to be seen as natural, unreflecting, but it is rooted in social background’ (Turner et al., 2002:220). In other words, the *habitus* is strongly related to one’s position in the social structure. Taste is a component of the *habitus*, thus, given the relationship between tastes and social structure, consumption and lifestyle preferences involve discriminatory judgement (Featherstone, 1991). Hence,

In matters of taste, more than anywhere else, all determination is negation; and tastes are perhaps first and foremost distaste, disgust provoked by horror or visceral intolerance (‘sick-making’) of the tastes of others. (Bourdieu, 1984:56)

In the social space, taste has the power to transform things into distinct and distinctive symbols. The dynamic structure of the *habitus* affects the very rules of distinction, which are also flexible. The rules of distinction can be seen as tendencies and therefore surmountable social obstacles. Position in the social structure may change due to social mobility processes, and so the *habitus* is also deemed to incorporate new dispositions. For example, some studies (e.g. Hargreaves and Castell, 1987) suggest that the preference for classical music is likely to increase with age.

As Bourdieu’s work accounts for the relationship between the reproduction of the class system, consumption and taste (Clarke et al., 2003) strategies of social reproduction become central. The book does not discuss different individual tastes and preferences, and conversely, it asserts that class position influences tastes and tastes reinforce class position. In this sense, taste is a marker of social class or of class position, because tastes place individuals in relation to other tastes, which express social divisions. Such divisions also express social distinction and reflect the struggle for social distinction. Furthermore, as suggested above, tastes and dispositions reflect one’s social origin (Bourdieu, [1979] 1984). The implication is that, unlike Veblen, Bourdieu posits wealth as a determinant of one’s life chances, but not of one’s social status. This is because more than wealth, cultural and symbolic capitals play a foremost role in the acquisition of social status given the many ways in which they can be used to display taste. Individuals do compete for status but they do it within the various fields or markets, and cultural capital deployed in the search for distinction aims at securing both self- and class-identity (Bourdieu, [1979] 1984).

Cultural capital, then, is correlated to taste in every way it can be manifested, be it the appreciation of art forms, the practice of sports, the consumption of food, apparel or even housing. All these are

social practices, and as it happens with practices in general, stem from the relationship between situation and *habitus*. Practices related to taste are commonly conceived as purely individual and therefore unrelated to the social world. In *Distinction* (Bourdieu, [1979] 1984), however, the cultivated disposition (expressed as good taste) and cultural competence in different domains (appraised by the goods consumed and how they are appropriated) are correlated to institutionalised cultural capital (scholastic credentials) as well as to one's social origin (occupation). The correlation between 'good taste', cultural capital in the institutionalised form and social origin helps understand why cultural capital can be put to use in any social field. However, it also reveals why it is particularly effective in the field of cultural consumption, where it is used to define and to classify taste. Cultural capital is closely related to the educational qualifications and social background, and involves the development of an educated judgement of cultural products and practices, namely the visual arts or opera (Bourdieu, [1979] 1984). As a result, to achieve distinction, taste is always based on a critical judgement leading it to gain distance from that which is popular. As Bourdieu (1984:56) puts it, 'It is no accident that, when they have to be justified, they are asserted purely negatively, by the refusal of other tastes.' The definition of 'good taste', then, can be used as a form of 'symbolic violence' because it expresses material domination in nonmaterial ways (Acquaint, 1992:14). Moreover, 'Taste is an acquired disposition to 'differentiate' and 'appreciate' ... to establish and mark differences by a process of distinction' Bourdieu (1984:466). Taste is therefore a way of ensuring social recognition and status.

Taste is, nonetheless, also linked to necessity. The existence of an upper class culture and upper class taste does not override lower class values and tastes. Bourdieu did not find evidence of a universal acceptance of upper class values and life styles. Instead, he argued that while the absence of material need is paramount to the definition of higher-class taste, lower-class taste stems from necessity. This is to say that lower class taste reflects constraints caused by material deprivation. Such constraints limit access to cultural objects and practices that are highly valued and constitute the very realm of upper-class taste. Thus, in *Distinction* (Bourdieu, [1979] 1984), lower class taste is depicted according to usefulness and necessity, and food provides a good example. Empirical evidence suggested that those who take food as an art form and therefore enjoy Nouvelle Cuisine belong to upper social strata. Working-class people prefer substantial food, and for that reason, matters such as dish presentation, colour or refinement of food become secondary as quantity rather than quality and presentation is at stake. The same logic applies to clothing, furniture, and sports alike. Antiques, for example, are a typical issue of the upper classes, while practical and useful styleless furniture best depict working class household furnishings. In the same vein, fashion and haute couture are mostly upper class domains. In the case of sports, upper classes also engage in

selective and effortless sportive activities. Conversely, lower class people are usually more 'physical' and thus are more likely to engage in activities such as boxing, wrestling or football. The class distribution of different sports depends upon the class representation of "the costs (economic, cultural and 'physical') and the benefits attached to the different sports" (Bourdieu, [1979] 1984: 20). Sports less accessible and symbolically more rewarding are therefore more related to the upper classes, especially when they require joining selective clubs, as it happens with polo and golf.

Bourdieu's theory of necessity helps understand how different life-styles are affected by class origin. The working class taste is, therefore a taste of necessity. In other words, taste is marked by the relation to necessity and the perception of what is needed. In addition, Bourdieu ([1979] 1984) claims that there is a popular culture, which does not simply accept the values of upper class culture altogether. Popular culture offers resistance to the taste of those located in higher positions in the social space. Upper and lower class culture have, therefore, clear and different features, and different tastes. However, ambiguity is the realm of middle-class taste, located between the dominant upper classes and the dominated lower classes. Middle-class people identify with the upper class tastes, their mobility target. Still, lower volume of cultural capital amounts to the lesser degree of legitimacy of the cultural activities developed by the middle-classes. In the middle classes, struggle for distinction entails the opposition of middle class taste to popular taste, which is taken as negative and therefore is depreciated. However, the pervasiveness of distinction also leads the upper classes to clearly differentiate themselves from middle class taste. This is achieved both by securing their status positions and at times by a return to popular taste. Since upper class abhors the 'pretentiousness' of middle class taste, the naivety of popular culture is an alternative:

The essentialist merit of the 'common people' is that they have none of the pretensions to art (or power) which inspire the ambitions of the 'petit bourgeois'. Their indifference tacitly acknowledges the monopoly. That is why, in the mythology of artists and intellectuals, whose outflanking and double-negating strategies sometimes lead them back to 'popular' tastes and opinions, the 'people' so often play a role not unlike that of the peasantry in the conservative ideologies of the declining aristocracy. (Bourdieu, [1979] 1984:62)

The reaction of the cultural aristocracy to middle class pretentiousness is imprinted in upper class life-styles: holiday houses in typical countryside sites, the concern with typical rural and popular furnishings, the adoption of peasant dishes, folk music and even some sorts of popular sports (see *Distinction*, 1984:209).

Bourdieu's work suggests that distinction strategies are not straightforward and therefore need to be examined carefully. The complexity and nuances of the struggle for distinction challenges Veblen's

views, which are concentrated on the trickle down effect, as those in lower hierarchical positions will tend to emulate leisure class consumption patterns and lifestyles. However, the return of upper bourgeoisie to popular culture provides a 'trickle up example', even if it may be a distinctive effort to keep the distance from middle-class taste. The contrasting aspects of both words will be further explored in the next section.

### **III Discussion: how conspicuous is distinction?**

Conspicuous consumption. If it is arguable that Bourdieu's analysis of social distinction bears the mark of Veblen's views on the leisure class and conspicuous consumption, there is little more in common in the two approaches than the idea that consumption is a function of culture and a marker of social class. A first difference respects Veblen's key-expression: 'conspicuous consumption'. It stresses the function of 'status symbols' as ways of displaying one's social standing. Veblen was concerned with the conspicuous consumption of the higher and unproductive higher classes, precisely because the upper classes were not directly involved in economic production activities. Thus, he concentrated on the upper aristocratic classes, whose values and practices were widely accepted and emulated by the other social classes. Wastefulness was at the root of conspicuous consumption, because to be able to spend large sums of money on useless futile products clearly denounces the conspicuous consumer as a member of the leisure class. This is to say, someone who did not earn money through a useful employment. In *Distinction* ([1979] 1984) Bourdieu addresses all sorts of consumption, whether conspicuous or not, because consumption reveals and reinforces class position. Conspicuous consumption appears as a specific type of behaviour, compatible with the middle class tendency to ostentatious taste, but emulation is not unavoidable. Tastes and preferences are determined socially by the way social agents relate to their current or foreseen position in social structure. Furthermore, tastes and preferences are a matter of one's *habitus*: taste manifests one's *habitus*, and in turn, the *habitus* is a function of one's social class. In this construction, more than economic capital, cultural capital in all its forms, constitutes a crucial dimension of social life and of consumption, particularly in the case of distinctive goods. Moreover, Bourdieu addressed the subtle nuances of distinction strategies that may or may not require conspicuous displays of wealth. Bourdieu's theory as more complex than Veblen's as it encompasses a wider range of behaviour, and is not restricted to Veblen's luxurious goods.



Wealth and status. Central to Bourdieu's theory is the idea that consumption practices and the ways these manifest taste, influence the creation and maintenance of hierarchical social relationships. Following Weber (1978) and Veblen ([1899] 2008), Bourdieu emphasised the hierarchical nature of the status system of modern society. Evoking Weber's notion of status groups, Veblen focused on wealth as a source of prestige through the judgement of others. Bourdieu was less concerned with wealth alone and focused on cultural capital, especially in the incorporated form, which is used to display taste. Both authors acknowledge the social competition for status, taken as a scarce resource. In addition, Veblen addressed competition in evolutionist terms, and provided a straightforward account of social stratification and social mobility, both grounded on the acquisition and display of wealth. In Bourdieu, however, the competition for status takes place within the historical development of the multiple fields, or markets. Moreover, the chances for upward mobility are limited because of one's *habitus*. As a result, newly acquired wealth will not necessarily entail status advancements. The conspicuous mode of consumption that characterises the *nouveau riche* is a case in point, as it hardly works as a source of social advancement let alone social honour. In addition, it brings back the notion of taste as a negative classifier and classifying process: good taste implies bad taste. The definition of good and bad taste is grounded on a differentiation from what is popular and common. Besides, taste is a matter of class, a property that prevents plain emulation as described by Veblen.

Trickle down, trickle up effects. Emulation is the idea that Veblen used, to suggest that taste moves downwards, sometimes described as the trickle down effect (see *Distinction*, 1984). Again, in Bourdieu we find taste moving in many ways according to the rule of distinction. This is to say that taste moves up and downwards, although it also seems to be circling around the social space. This is to say that the trickle down effect certainly occurs, and fashion is a case in point (Bourdieu, 1984). However this is an intricate process. The fact that taste is grounded on one's social origin limits emulation. Bourdieu's study shows how the working classes develop their own values and their own taste in a close relationship to necessity. Necessity will therefore explain why the working classes will avoid a number of cultural investments, which are seen as useless (e.g. going to museums, buying books, etc.). Thus, Bourdieu described how the working class actively oppose to the tastes of the upper classes. However, the rule of distinction gives way to the trickle up effect as in the case of the middle classes, usually engaged in pedantic sort of taste and consumption, leading the upper classes to move down to popular taste as a way to maintain their distinction. Such contrasts suggest that emulation might be a feeble explanation for consumerism and tastes, as it depicts social groups as determined by the dominant culture. Instead, in Bourdieu's study we find social groups struggling for the definition of 'good taste' or 'bad taste', a process that leads to social group

differentiation in the social space throughout their specific cultural consumptions. Furthermore, emulation leads to plain possession of goods or access to cultural resources. It does not teach people how to use or enjoy the goods or how to appreciate, say a work of art, the opera and so forth, as class origin and the development of the *habitus* does.

Cultural capital. The *habitus* constitutes a sort of personal cultural inheritance. In turn, culture usually limits the scope of social mobility. When moving across the social space, cultural capital in its incorporated form is a crucial factor. Cultural capital refers to accumulated knowledge about artistic and intellectual works, which is learned from early socialisation and social upbringing within the family (the incorporated form) and within the school system (the institutionalised form). Previous studies about education (Bourdieu et Passeron, 1990) led Bourdieu (1984:23) to argue that the acquisition of cultural capital is ‘inscribed, as an objective demand, in membership of the bourgeoisie and in the qualifications giving access to its rights and duties.’ For this reason the aesthetic taste and higher levels of cultural capital are correlated to prestigious class positions through the mark of distinction. Thus, distinction is a broader notion than Veblen’s conspicuous consumption. Moreover, it overrides the mechanism of emulation. Upper class lifestyles and tastes cannot be just emulated, as there is the case of appropriation and capable uses of cultural goods. So, instead of a single dominant upper class lifestyle that everyone will attempt to emulate, in Bourdieu we find different class tastes and lifestyles. As a result, cultural capital is the major stake in the consumption and distinction games, and objective class conditions do limit the ability of individuals to participate in the distinction game.

Evolutionary *habitus* and omnivorousness. As seen, Veblen’s evolutionary views lead him to reduce his explanation of consumerism to emulation, that is, imitation and competition. Emulation, in this particular case, is enhanced by competition for social status. This explanation provides a deterministic account of human action, as individuals appear as simple organisms predetermined to follow the rule of the dominant aristocratic life-style. Bourdieu’s concept of *habitus*, although developed within a diverse framework, also carries an evolutionary tone. This is because although the *habitus* refers to dispositions that are acquired since an early age, it entails update. In other words, the *habitus* adapts to new situations and dispositions change although individuals need not be conscious of the cultural influences that favour or constrain their actions. This suggests that the *habitus* evolves with the individual, making the concept compatible and perhaps useful within evolutionary analysis. However, the *habitus* becomes conspicuous in situations where updating has not occurred and when individuals act within a context requiring specific dispositions which they lack. The *habitus* and, in fact, the whole distinction argument has been challenge by the notion of omnivorousness (e.g. Peterson & Kern 1996; Ricks 1996). This notion depicts contemporary society as a “commod-

ity society” (Warde et al., 1999) where both Bourdieu’s arguments regarding the struggle over cultural distinction and Veblen’s views on conspicuous consumption tend to lose their heuristic features.

The idea underlining omnivorousness is that taste and preferences are increasingly differentiated across cultural items and less across social groups. In other words, upper classes individuals may develop similar tastes as those in the working classes. Furthermore, one may enjoy French cuisine and fast food as well, or classical music and hip-hop. In this view, the idea of class culture (Bourdieu, 1984) or dominant leisure class culture (Veblen, 1899) is obsolete. Omnivorousness is grounded on research conducted in the United States and perhaps reflects the specificity of the US society. Recent research conducted in the UK (Gayo-Cal et al., 2006) suggests, nevertheless, that cultural consumption still acts as a marker of social differentiation in contemporary England. Moreover, omnivorousness overlooks subtle differences between consumption of cultural goods and appreciation and enjoyment of cultural items. For example, in *Distinction* (1984), Bourdieu draws attention to the different levels of knowledge and competence required to appreciate a cultural item. Taking the example of classical music, there are different levels of appreciation. Those who do not know music or how to play an instrument, for example the piano, are unable to relate to music in the same way that those who can play will. One can enjoy Beethoven and learn everything about the composer and his compositions. However, those with knowledge and competence about music and the piano are able to enjoy Beethoven’s Piano Sonatas by truly feeling the effect of each note on the keyboard. Knowledge about Beethoven is democratic and therefore accessible to all, learning music and to play the grand instrument is not. Thus, although more empirical research is needed, it is possible to posit that the omnivorousness idea captures solely the external manifestations of cultural consumerism and fails to address the modes of appropriation of cultural items, which need to be learned, in some cases, from an early age.

## **Conclusion**

Many of the differences found in Veblen’s and Bourdieu’s works stem from the different historical times and societies that inspire both works. Veblen captured the late nineteenth century American society, while Bourdieu was writing about the French mid-1970s society. Besides the historical differences, their intellectual affiliations explain the main differences in their perspectives. Veblen was an evolutionary economist, a brilliant intellectual who is said to be the founder of institutional economics and wanted to explain the consumerism boom of late nineteenth-century USA. Bourdieu

was trained as a philosopher, an anthropologist and later moved to sociology. In *Distinction*, he aimed at understanding further and explaining how culture, taste and preferences relate to social class. Finally, while Veblen's work is mainly speculative, *Distinction* draws on an extensive empirical research conducted in France. Nevertheless, one of Veblen's major achievements was to have established of the relationship between consumption and social hierarchy, even if, in his view, taste emerges as part of the a broader process of social evolution, which enabled the aristocracy to rule and to enforce its values and life-styles. Thus, his account of social stratification is plain as his analysis concentrates on the aristocracy and the aristocratic life-style as the paradigm universally emulated. Veblen's criticism of the upper class was grounded on two main aspects: (1) the upper classes were unproductive and (2) had managed to maintain and legitimate their conservative institutions. As a result, the aristocracy dominated society and its interests were opposite to the interests of a capitalist industrial society. To sum up, the institutions of the ruling class were conservative and held social evolution back.

Such were not Bourdieu's concerns, as he was interested in examining further the contributions of cultural capital to the forms of social reproduction and social differentiation. Veblen considered the knowledge of consumers conspicuous, in that it communicated acceptance of the norm of social honour. Thus, it is the subjectivity of individuals that contributes to the making of the social hierarchy. *Distinction* presents the results of extensive empirical research and demonstrates how consumption and taste are involved in the reproduction of the class system. This means that Bourdieu went beyond the individual, to show how class position and ultimately the *habitus*, or the set of relatively stable dispositions, determine to a large extent, taste and preferences. The coda is that taste is a marker of social class and not just of social honour as Veblen thought. In Bourdieu's perspective the externalisation of the individual subjectivity is one side of the whole process, as the norm of prestige invades also private domains, meaning that social constraints do act upon the individual. Veblen's emphasis on the relevance of economic capital contrasts with Bourdieu's emphasis on cultural capital. *The Theory of the Leisure Class* is about the social and symbolic means of displaying and wasting of economic capital. In *Distinction* economic capital may be advantageous in the acquisition of cultural capital and the latter can also be converted into economic capital. Furthermore, social distinction is fuelled by cultural capital, especially in the incorporated form.

Both Veblen and Bourdieu address the issue of social domination. The former focused on the ways the leisure class exerted domination over society, and held the power to enforce social norms and values. Bourdieu, in turn explained how domination stems from the volume and composition of the different capitals, which are valued in the different social fields where social activities unfold. In this sense, capital means power and therefore, dominant positions are equivalent to powerful posi-

tions. Competition is another common process that both authors address. While in Veblen social competition appears as individual behaviour that manifests itself through ostentatious consumption and is driven by the inclusion in the upper class, Bourdieu portrays competition as a permanent condition across the different social fields. However, struggles do not just evolve around access to upper positions, as people in different classes mostly compete for the establishment of patterns of distinction, and the norms of legitimate taste. In other words, people compete for the definition of 'good and bad taste.' Hence, for Bourdieu culture is a fundamental aspect of social life. In addition, both consumption and lifestyles entail invidious judgement. Besides, the discussion about the *habitus* shows how it affects areas of social practice that may include art but also fashion, food consumption, photography or sportive activities.

The *habitus* explains how the preference for fast food or French cuisine is less a function of one's income than it is of one's inherited and learned lifestyle. This means that in Bourdieu the trickle down effect coexists with Veblen's trickle up effect and, therefore, tastes vary horizontally as a result of the *habitus* and the process of its formation. As a result, social and economic mobility seldom overlap, and economic upward mobility does not automatically entail social mobility. For this reason, the combination of wealth with cultural capital variegates social space originating different levels of social status and social inequality. In this sense, Bourdieu's account helps understanding social stratification of modern societies by relating the material to the cultural. Economic properties of class and cultural attributes of lifestyles are associated and he successfully 're-established the foundational and constructive role of culture in social inequality in a period when economic determinist accounts predominated' (Le Roux et al., 2008:1063). Since Veblen, the old aristocratic ways have almost disappeared and work became a universal right instead of the prerogative of specific social classes. Furthermore, to be out of work no longer manifests an aristocratic life-style, and is unlikely to concur to social honour. Rather, it is more likely to signal social deprivation. Leisure has also become a social value and although some forms of leisure are still honorific, it is no longer acceptable in Veblen's terms. Nevertheless, people seem to still engage in playing the game of distinction claiming their taste as the "good one", as opposed to the "bad taste" of others.

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