



**AALBORG UNIVERSITY**  
DENMARK

**Aalborg Universitet**

## Updating cultural capital theory

*a discussion based on studies in Denmark and in Britain*

Prieur, Annick; Savage, Mike

*Published in:*  
Poetics

*DOI (link to publication from Publisher):*  
[10.1016/j.poetic.2011.09.002](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.poetic.2011.09.002)

*Publication date:*  
2011

*Document Version*  
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication from Aalborg University](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*

Prieur, A., & Savage, M. (2011). Updating cultural capital theory: a discussion based on studies in Denmark and in Britain. *Poetics*, 39(6), 566-580. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.poetic.2011.09.002>

### General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- ? Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- ? You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- ? You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal ?

### Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us at [vbn@aub.aau.dk](mailto:vbn@aub.aau.dk) providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.



# Updating cultural capital theory: A discussion based on studies in Denmark and in Britain

Annick Prieur<sup>a</sup>, Mike Savage<sup>b,\*</sup>

<sup>a</sup> *Department of Sociology, Social Work and Organisation, Kroghstræde, Room 1, 9220 Aalborg Ø, Denmark*

<sup>b</sup> *Department of Sociology, Wentworth College, University of York, Heslington, York YO10 5DD, United Kingdom*

Available online 4 November 2011

---

## Abstract

This paper considers how the analysis of cultural engagement can be elaborated through a reworking of the concept of cultural capital, as originally derived from Bourdieu's (1984) *Distinction*. Drawing on detailed studies of the UK and Aalborg, Denmark, we show that despite the weakening of "highbrow" culture, cultural oppositions can nonetheless readily be detected. We point to nine oppositions, mostly shared between the nations. Three tensions between (a) participation and non-participation in cultural activities; (b) knowledge and ignorance in cultural issues (such as for music, literature, and art); and (c) an international and a local or national orientation stand out as the most important. We discuss whether these oppositions can usefully be conceptualised as cultural capital. We argue that such a conceptualisation demands, first, that cultural capital is understood in relative rather than absolute terms, and that a field analytic perspective provides the means of understanding cultural capital as such a relative entity. Second, the move from the empirical observation of oppositions to the conceptualisation of cultural capital also demands that the functioning of features such as participation, knowledge and an international orientation in class domination should be demonstrated, as it cannot just be assumed.

© 2011 Elsevier B.V. All rights reserved.

---

## 1. Introduction

The term cultural capital is now widely deployed across the social sciences (for example, see the discussion in Warde and Savage, 2009) to refer broadly to the way that cultural processes are implicated in social stratification. There are now numerous theoretical reflections on the concept of cultural capital itself (e.g., Goldthorpe, 2007; Savage et al., 2005, 2007; Skeggs, 2004). Yet

---

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: [ap@socsci.aau.dk](mailto:ap@socsci.aau.dk) (A. Prieur), [Mike.Savage@york.ac.uk](mailto:Mike.Savage@york.ac.uk) (M. Savage).

although Bourdieu is a central reference point in these debates, it is not clear that similar conceptualisations to his are being used. Furthermore, as the concept is increasingly deployed in a comparative framework, there is increasing awareness that the nature of cultural capital dissected by Bourdieu in 1960s France may not be that which operates today—whether in France or elsewhere. Does it have the same characteristics—and the same function? This is an important issue because there is a tendency in cultural sociology to assume that if traditional “highbrow” legitimate culture is no longer pervasive this entails that cultural capital itself is less significant. Our argument is that even if the concept of cultural capital does not have the same content as in Bourdieu’s (1984) *Distinction*, it can be meaningfully used in analyses of contemporary societies—if used with care and accuracy. In particular, we emphasise the need to deploy a relative concept of cultural capital that places it within a field analytical approach.

The aim in this paper is therefore to stimulate discussion about the value and content of the concept of cultural capital by reporting on how the concept has been operationalised in our own respective collaborative studies in Denmark and the UK. Elaborating key findings from our two studies (the COMPAS project in Aalborg, Denmark<sup>1</sup> and the Cultural Capital and Social Exclusion study in UK<sup>2</sup>) demonstrates that although there are substantial changes from the character of cultural capital discussed in *Distinction* (Bourdieu, 1984), we can nonetheless continue to see cultural oppositions and tensions amongst the population that can still be identified as forms of cultural capital.

Section 1 returns to the origins of the concept of cultural capital in Pierre Bourdieu’s sociology as a means of demonstrating the need to locate its use within his wider field analytical perspective. In Section 2, we stake out our view that we can usefully distinguish between absolute and relative concepts of cultural capital within a field analytic perspective. As an absolute entity—where it is seen to embody certain tastes and practices, for instance, a liking for classical music—it is easy to show that the value of cultural capital is obsolete, or at least that it is difficult to transfer the high value given to classic highbrow culture in France in the 1960s to other European countries today. However, by recognising it as part of a process of contestation within a field, where cultural capital is distinguished through its differentiation from other cultural practices and tastes, we still find powerful cultural oppositions at work in our two studies. In Section 3, we show that—in spite of apparent differences in the operationalisation of cultural capital in the Danish and British projects—there are in fact some deeper similarities and convergences. We see in both studies that it is possible to make the difficult move from observations of class structured oppositions to more specific claims about how cultural capital works across varied kinds of social relation.

---

<sup>1</sup> The COMPAS study (2004–2208) received funding from the Danish Social Science Research Council, and was headed by Annick Prieur in cooperation with Lennart Rosenlund and the Ph.D. students S.T. Faber and J. Skjott-Larsen. The four were jointly responsible for designing the survey, which was later analyzed empirically primarily by Rosenlund and Skjott-Larsen. Skjott-Larsen and Faber have also provided interview data and analyzed these. Prieur has coordinated the writing and mainly worked with theoretical development. For more information see [www.socsci.aau.dk/compas](http://www.socsci.aau.dk/compas).

<sup>2</sup> The research team for the ESRC project “Cultural Capital and Social Exclusion: A Critical Investigation” (award number R000239801) comprises Tony Bennett (Principal Investigator), Mike Savage, Elizabeth Silva, Alan Warde (Co-applicants), David Wright and Modesto Gayo-Cal (Research Fellows). The applicants were jointly responsible for the design of the national survey and the focus groups and the household interviews that generated the quantitative and qualitative data for the project. Elizabeth Silva, aided by David Wright, coordinated the analysis of the qualitative data from the focus groups and household interviews. Mike Savage and Alan Warde, assisted by Modesto Gayo-Cal, coordinated the analyses of the quantitative data produced by the survey. Tony Bennett was responsible for the overall coordination of the project.

## 2. Bourdieu and the genesis of the concept of cultural capital

In their studies of the educational system during the 1960s, Bourdieu and his collaborators initially employed the concept of cultural capital to explain the higher success rates for the children of educated parents in educational attainment. These children enjoy an advantage in school, not only thanks to the help they receive from their parents, but also due to their intimate familiarity with highbrow culture, such as fine arts and classical music. “Not only do the more privileged students derive from their background of origin, habits, skills, and attitudes which serve them directly in their scholastic tasks”, they argue, “but they also inherit from it knowledge and know-how, tastes, and a ‘good taste’ whose scholastic profitability is no less certain for being indirect” (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1979 [1964], p. 17).

These habits and skills are what become identified as cultural capital. The first French edition of *The Inheritors* (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1979 [1964]) refers to “capital linguistique”, a term that is replaced with cultural capital in the 1979 translation (Robbins, 2005, p. 25). In the meantime, cultural capital had emerged as a key concept in another book that Bourdieu co-authored with Passeron, *Reproduction* (1996 [1970]), where the concept was linked to the evaluation criteria imposed on all school pupils, which the pupils from culturally privileged origins comply with more easily. The school not only provides children with new knowledge, but also certifies the forms of knowledge the culturally privileged children have acquired beforehand by giving them high marks for their “cultivated naturalness” (cf. Bourdieu, 1984, p. 71). The school devalues the kind of knowledge that it provides as being too “academic”, as bearing “the vulgar mark of effort”, and thus lacking in “ease and grace” (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1979 [1964], p. 21).

It is only from the 1970s that Bourdieu extends his analysis away from the specific terrain of education, especially in *Distinction*, where he sees cultural capital as being implicated in the character of different groups’ lifestyles, tastes, cultural competences and participation, as well as attitudes in cultural, moral and political matters. The book thereby reveals how cultural and economic capitals operate to create complex patterns of social differentiation that are linked to fundamental processes of social stratification and inequality. It is in this way that specific cultural attributes such as a taste for elite classical music are regarded as attributes of cultural capital in subsequent debates in cultural sociology. However, care is needed here. *Distinction* can be read as one long illustration of key indicators of cultural capital, for the book does not contain any formal definition of the concept. Just as cultural capital had a series of different meanings in the earlier works on education (cf. Lamont and Lareau, 1988), the concept ranges in *Distinction* over formal education, knowledge about classical music, preferences for modern art, well-filled bookshelves, etc. This slipperiness should not, however, be taken as a weakness, for there is an underlying focus in Bourdieu’s conceptualisation. The essence of cultural capital is that it provides symbolic mastery through a whole array of different forms of knowledge, tastes, preferences, properties, etc. (see further Holt, 1997; Lizardo, 2008).

A problem here is that Bourdieu and his collaborators often used the term cultural capital interchangeably with “legitimate culture” (cf. Lamont and Lareau, 1988, p. 157). This makes it possible to assume that Bourdieu’s concept of cultural capital is necessarily associated with “high”, snobbish or elite culture, as exemplified in classical music and the literary canon. Thus, proponents of the “cultural omnivore” argument hold that Bourdieu’s concern is with snobbish, “highbrow” culture—as manifested by a liking for classical music (especially) and other forms of traditional culture (e.g., Chan and Goldthorpe, 2005, 2007; Peterson and Kern, 1996; Peterson and Simkus, 1992). Such cultural sociologists thus see the existence of more hybrid cultural

forms as necessarily marking the erosion of cultural capital. This, we want to argue, is a quite erroneous path to follow.

Instead, we need to adopt the kind of historically oriented approach that Bourdieu himself adopts, which conceives of cultural capital as intrinsic to a social field within which it is contested and subject to transformations as well as reproduction (we will elaborate more on the field concept in the next section). This follows the view of Kingston (2001, p. 89) that the concept of cultural capital points to a resource “that has ‘market value’ in the struggle for privilege” or, in the words of Lareau and Weininger (2003, p. 567), a resource “that provides access to scarce rewards, is subject to monopolisation, and, under certain conditions, may be transmitted from one generation to the next”.

It is perhaps unhelpful that Bourdieu’s (1986) most famous essay on these themes, “The Forms of Capital” is somewhat diversionary because it does not specifically explore the field specific qualities of different kinds of capital. Instead, it focuses on habitus. He reports that cultural capital can be found in three different forms: as an embodied state, based on “long lasting dispositions of the mind and the body” (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 243), but this refers to the habitus as a bundle of tastes and judgmental competences. This form of cultural capital is to a large degree inherited or, more precisely, acquired through an upbringing in a “cultivated home”. It may be measured as attitudes, preferences and competences. Secondly, there is an objectified state, “in the form of cultural goods” (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 243), which could be book collections or musical instruments. These goods will reflect the habitus and may be observed or reported in surveys. Lastly, cultural capital also exists in an institutionalised state, which first and foremost concerns educational qualifications. Although this famous distinction is consistent with field analysis, this element is not specifically brought out. Let us now attempt to do this.

### 3. Field analytical conceptions of cultural capital

Bourdieu refers to the Marxist idea that capital is accumulated labour in expressing the notion of the social world as “accumulated history” (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 241). The actions of social agents bear traces of their past (see also Lizardo, 2008). In his 1986 chapter, the competencies that serve as cultural capital appear to depend upon the social context. This is the argument put forward by Lareau and Weininger (2003, p. 579), who subsequently refer to cultural capital as a relative and not a universal entity. This allows us to see the value of conceptualising cultural capital within a field analytic perspective. One of the main themes here is a recognition of historical mutation: what is regarded today as expressions of refined taste may be déclassé tomorrow; and what is regarded as fashionable in France may be disregarded in Japan, or vice versa (Bourdieu, 1998). For Bourdieu, capital is a relational concept that designates a social force that works within a field in which it is subject to contestation. But this force only exists if it is perceived as such, i.e., if the agents in the field attribute this force to it. As it depends on perception, there can be no universal standards—hence the need for comparative and historical research.

Nevertheless, as we read *Distinction*, there are also occasions when absolute elements are slipped into accounts of cultural capital. Here, cultural capital is defined in terms of the absolutes of the “Kantian aesthetic”: the eye rates over the other senses; the abstract over the concrete; the form over the function; the rare over the common and easily accessible. That which requires time, effort and historical knowledge, rates over the immediate satisfaction of desires (cf. Fowler, 1997, 45 ff.). According to this logic, chess has intrinsic qualities that will always link it more closely to elite culture than bowling ever may, and the reading of avant-garde poetry will always

be linked to elite culture, as it demands knowledge about the history of poetry—even if what is avant-garde today may be school curriculum tomorrow. These signs of cultural capital are not true universals, as elite forms of distinction can operate without particular forms of chess or poetry. They have been historically constituted as particular forms of elite culture, and they are historically mutable. Chess started as a quite simple game, but was gradually intellectualised. Knowledge of poetry was once critical in elite culture in Western societies, but seems now to have a marginal position. Nothing is stable—as Bourdieu himself mentioned (1998, p. 4), boxing was an aristocratic sport in France at the end of the 19th century but has subsequently descended the social ladder.

The operation of “relative” cultural capital need not involve a proclivity for “high” or “legitimate” culture. We prefer instead Lamont and Lareau’s (1988, p. 156) definition of cultural capital as being “institutionalized, i.e., widely shared, high status cultural signals (attitudes, preferences, formal knowledge, behaviours, goods and credentials) used for social and cultural exclusion”. It is not then classical highbrow culture, as such, but historically specific forms of its institutionalisation and status that confer on it a value as cultural capital. Our British and Danish evidence, for example, suggests that cultural capital has been redefined, away from a highbrow model to one that is closer to a scientific, technical and media oriented framing, which reflects the changing values of different kinds of expertise in contemporary, neo-liberal capitalism (Savage, 2010).

To sum up our argument so far, we can see that Bourdieu did not endorse an elitist equation between “culture” and “highbrow culture”, nor did he embrace the relativist (or populist) claim that all cultures have the same value (see Bennett, 2005). For Bourdieu, a capital is always linked to a field (see Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992; Grenfell, 2010), in which agents battle relationally for strategic advantage and position. Capitals permit the accumulation of advantages within fields, and their convertibility between them (Savage et al., 2005; Warde, 2007). These fields are therefore an arena for social struggles over the attribution of value, or, more precisely, over both the distribution and the definition of the forms of capital that are specific to particular fields. The newcomers within, for instance, a literary field will have an interest in changing the patterns of distribution of capital by challenging the definition of capital, or of the forms of literature that are most recognised by other participants in the field. A field is therefore always in motion, and the qualities of a capital cannot be made once and for all: they will be challenged. Bourdieu’s use of field analysis is precisely designed to avoid defining certain kinds of cultural attributes as inherently part of cultural capital, as an ongoing contestation between social agents can affect the very stakes around which forms of cultural distinction are defined. This leads Bourdieu to a strongly historical framing in which shifts take place in the nature of those cultural forms—what Bourdieu terms “legitimate culture”—which are predominantly possessed by the highly educated. In endorsing this field analytic approach, we need to explore which kinds of cultural practices are recognised as valuable, by whom, and also the consequences of this for those who do not take part in such practices and who are thereby led to devalue their own cultural forms. This is what Bourdieu termed symbolic violence: the processes through which the socially dominated devalue their own taste, preferences, lifestyle capacities, or whole habitus due to the awe in which they hold dominant cultural forms and ways of being.

This formulation allows us to do justice to Bourdieu’s own empirical observations about cultural capital in 1960s France, and to recognise his prescience in noting emerging cultural forms. In the chapter on the dominant class in *Distinction*, Bourdieu (1984) demonstrates a clear awareness concerning the shifting status of classical highbrow culture in his portrayal of a new generation of executives and managers committed to “‘modernism,’ ‘dynamism,’ and

‘cosmopolitanism’: embracing new technology and open to foreign culture” (Weininger, 2005, p. 127; referring to Bourdieu, 1984, pp. 295–315). Bourdieu was also fully aware that highbrow culture was losing ground to a commercialised popular culture. He described a phenomenon he labelled inverted snobbery (Bourdieu, 2003, p. 71): “Indeed, it is the first time in history that the cheapest products of a popular culture . . . are imposing themselves as chic”. He mentioned tattoos and the baggy pants that originated from prisons in the US and argued that the “civilisation” (his quotation marks) embodied by jeans, Coca-Cola and McDonald’s together with economic power had symbolic power, thanks to the incorporation of the victims themselves into this culture. His analysis of popular culture may lack both sophistication and accuracy (the respectable appropriation of jeans and Coca-Cola from popular culture is not that new). He nevertheless recognises here the shifting structures of evaluation. Bourdieu generally regarded the autonomy of the cultural field as being threatened by the economic field but did not explicate the consequences that this development unavoidably must have for the value and convertibility of cultural capital.

We therefore reject the view that cultural capital is inherently associated with a taste for, or knowledge of, specific attributes of high or legitimate culture. Rather it is as an entity embedded in social contexts, and therefore also in perpetual change. We can see examples of “popular” culture being “gentrified”, as for instance, the recent finding from British research that a liking for heavy metal music is now associated with the highly educated (Bennett et al., 2009; Savage and Gayo, 2011). Cultural capital can itself be reconfigured. This is what Bourdieu himself had in mind when pointing to the shifting structures of evaluation which meant that the existence of cultural capital in any given society could be taken for granted, but had to be demonstrated empirically, proceeding from a clear theoretical understanding of what cultural capital is and how it operates.

Having clarified our terms, let us now consider what light a relative concept of cultural capital might throw on our Danish and British studies. We want to show how we propose more sophisticated, relative approaches to the relations between social cultural differentiation which have greater contemporary purchase than approaches which, as we have shown, misinterpret Bourdieu’s concepts in absolutist terms.

#### 4. Cultural capital in a Danish city and the UK

In *Distinction*, Bourdieu (1984, pp. 128–129) drew a sociological map of the French social space as a multidimensional system of social positions. This map was drawn as a summary graph based on several analyses of different datasets, using Multiple Correspondence Analysis (MCA), and has an ambiguous status between empirical representation and theoretical model (cf. Prieur et al., 2008, p. 48). MCA (or GDA—Geometric Data Analysis) is a statistical technique that provides a visualisation of the clustering of complex datasets, where properties that frequently occur together with the same respondents, or with respondents who in other respects resemble each other, will also figure close to each other in the map, while properties that rarely occur together will be situated far from each other. The dimensions that structure this distribution of the data may thereafter be analyzed.

MCA is a controversial method that requires some elaboration. Originating in the work of the French mathematician Benzécri, Bourdieu championed it as a method which allowed field dynamics to be empirically unravelled in ways that would reveal the contingent relationships between practices and tastes on the one hand and social positions on the other. Hence, rather than assuming that, say, a taste for classical music is inherently a form of highbrow culture, MCA allows



us to empirically inspect whether a liking for classical music stands in opposition to more “popular” tastes (for an extended discussion of this point, see [Savage and Gayo, 2011](#)). However, it has never been widely used in Anglophone social science because it is not a standard “hypothesis testing” method deploying inferential statistics. Nonetheless, there is now a growing recognition of its potential value even from social scientists who do not endorse a Bourdieusian perspective (e.g., [Chan, 2010](#)), and we see our use of this approach in our studies as allowing an empirically rigorous way of unpacking the nature of contemporary cultural capital within a field analytical approach.

[Bourdieu \(1984\)](#) regarded the space of social positions as well as the space of lifestyles as basically structured in a homologous way with capital volume (economic + cultural capital) as the strongest structuring dimension and capital composition (the relative weight of the two) as the second strongest dimension. The third dimension, in order of importance (but not presented in a two-dimensional diagram), is a time-dimension referring to trajectories: the social agents’ history of stability or mobility related to the system of social positions. [Bourdieu \(1984\)](#) claimed that capital volume, as it accounted for the largest part of the statistical variation in an MCA of the survey data, was the primary force of social differentiation, and presented it on the map as the vertical axis. Along this dimension, [Bourdieu \(1984\)](#) distinguished between three main classes of social agents according to their possession of economic and cultural capital. These classes were subsequently divided into class fractions according to the second dimension of the map produced by: the capital composition or capital structure principle (drawn horizontally), which refers to the relative amount of the two main forms of capital that the social agents hold; i.e., whether cultural or economic capital is dominant.

The Danish study was designed to assess the relevance of Bourdieu’s model of social differentiation and lifestyles. The Danish city Aalborg was chosen, a city that is in the midst of a rapid transformation from an industrial to a post-industrial economy. A survey was conducted in 2004, and from the city’s 162,000 inhabitants, a sample of 1600 persons between 18 and 75 years of age was drawn. Thereafter, 1174 persons (73.4%) were interviewed about their lifestyles. The questions covered both different forms of cultural practice (going to museums, watching TV, etc.) and preferences (judging different music artists and authors, etc.). These data have been subjected to several MCAs. On the basis of the background data on different forms of capital, a construction of a Bourdieusian social space was produced wherein lifestyle choices were plotted in relation to one another ([Prieur et al., 2008](#); [Skjott-Larsen, 2008, in press](#)). The lifestyle variables were also used to construct a social space of lifestyles into which the background social variables were also plotted ([Prieur and Rosenlund, 2010](#)). These procedures revealed a series of oppositions regarding cultural practices, which could be linked both to the volume and to the composition of capital. This gives some justification for assuming that both economic capital and cultural capital actually work as structuring forces in Aalborg.

The British study, *Culture, Class, Distinction* ([Bennett et al., 2009](#)) is, in contrast, a national study that can be seen as a fusion of British class analysis—with its concern with understanding the significance of occupational classes ([Crompton, 2008](#)), and a Bourdieusian analysis of cultural capital. The result is that the analysis of cultural capital embedded within a wider interest in re-conceptualising the nature of social stratification in the UK. Thus, following in the lineage of [Goldthorpe \(1980\)](#) and [Marshall et al. \(1988\)](#), much of the book seeks to demonstrate the power of class divisions in Britain, as apparent in the analysis of cultural taste and participation. [Bennett et al. \(2009\)](#) therefore enter into debates about the optimal means of classifying occupations into social classes (see also [LeRoux et al., 2008](#)), where they argue that Goldthorpe’s concept of the professional and managerial “service class” unhelpfully includes lower managers alongside the members of a more distinctive professional and executive class. One important



difference from the Danish study is, that while the British study confirmed the total volume of capital as the most important differentiating principle, the composition of capital proved to be less important. Instead, the second axis was structured principally by age, and the composition principle was only evident in a weak fourth axis. This suggests that the role of social trajectory that Bourdieu noted (as part of his third axis in MCA) might be even more important today, though the lack of longitudinal data in the British study means that this cannot be demonstrated.

There were clear indications in both studies that cultural capital does not operate straightforwardly as a form of legitimate culture that is widely accepted. In Britain, the working class respondents “are not in awe of legitimate culture and find no value in refinement” (Bennett et al., 2009, p. 205), and “there is no indication of deference towards legitimate culture” (Bennett et al., 2009, p. 212). The authors therefore argue that an account of cultural capital that focuses on the “Kantian aesthetic” has little purchase in the contemporary British context (Bennett et al., 2009, p. 51). Warde (2007, p. 1) summarises the British case as follows,

The evidence suggests that legitimate culture, in Bourdieu’s sense, is in retreat. No one in the working class is much in awe of the consecrated; few of the middle class are exercised by the damage caused by popular culture. Laying claim to distinction through command of legitimate culture is not the sole driver of contemporary inequalities of culture. A primary reason is that processes of legitimisation or consecration in the UK today are not obviously operating in the way predicted by Bourdieu.

The same might be said about the Danish case. The lower classes did not, as a general rule, show a particular respect or awe for the cultural choices typical of the higher classes. The only noticeable sign of some cultural practices enjoying a status of legitimacy was a slight tendency for underreporting watching reality-TV and probably also over-reporting watching more intellectual programs or of attending high-cultural institutions like theatre or classical concerts. But as these examples were exceptions to the overall impression of autonomy in cultural choices throughout the social space, Bourdieu’s contention that the dominant classes’ cultural choices enjoying a general legitimacy may indeed be questioned.

Nonetheless, the authors of both studies, drawing on their MCAs, found significant differences between the cultural choices of different social groups. They can be grouped under 9 oppositions:

1. *Participation versus non-participation.* In Aalborg, this is particularly clear with respect to the usage of the city’s cultural facilities, where there is a sharp division between those who visit art museums, go to the theatre, concerts and sports events, on the one hand, and those who do not engage in any of these activities. The division is also present in reading practices, where some read many different forms of literature, and others do not read at all. Bennett et al. (2009) also detect this fundamental polarity between cultural engagement and disengagement, especially with respect to the use of public cultural institutions, which is inversely related to a distinction between those who use television and those who do not. Bennett et al. argue, furthermore, that cultural engagement should not be conflated with social engagement, as there is evidence that significant numbers of those who do not visit cultural institutions nonetheless have strong social ties, often based around kin and neighbourhood.
2. *Knowledge versus ignorance.* In both studies, this opposition is seen in the answers to questions about musical and literary preferences, where most of the underprivileged do not know the authors/artists named in the questionnaire, and hence the ability to refer to cultural figures, items and issues is itself unequally socially distributed. This having been said, a slight

caveat to this in the British case is the recognition that some literary and musical figures—such as the novelist Jane Austen or the painter JMW Turner—reach levels of recognition that are widely shared amongst the population at large, and which Bennett et al. (2009) claim is due to the widespread reference to these figures on television and in the media more generally.

3. *The abstract versus the concrete.* This is particularly clearly expressed in both studies in respondents' answers to questions about art preferences, where abstract art is seen as being in opposition to other art forms. In the British case, a liking for modern art is clearly opposed to a liking for landscape paintings. In the Aalborg case, the same relation appears in the distribution of agreement or disagreement with the statement "I prefer a picture when I can tell what it represents", and also in opinions about one of the authors (Svend-Åge Madsen, an avant-garde writer) and one of the TV-programs (Drengene fra Angora, satirical entertainment), where part of the fun is linked to exposing bad taste, as both these latter choices can be said to demand the ability to abstract from the stories told.
4. *The intellectually demanding versus the relaxing.* In Aalborg, this can be seen in choices regarding reading of both books and newspapers (Information, Politiken and/or Weekend-Avisen), TV-programs, and in uses of the Internet (whether the Internet is used primarily for information or just for a chat, etc.), as well as in whether going into the city is used for highbrow cultural purposes or only for recreational purposes. In the British case, the opposition appears to be between the "escapist" references to cultural forms that are deemed to offer a release from the pressures of everyday life, opposed to those who enjoy playing off a range of cultural reference points against each other, almost revelling in their capacity to handle multiple genres and cultural forms.
5. *The rare versus the usual.* In Aalborg, this is particularly visible in the way the respondents talk about their homes, where most people agree when asked if their homes may be characterized as "ordinary", while those who disagree are typically people with a high education. It can also be seen in responses to questions about the kind of food to serve to guests, where the educated elite has a preference for "something new and perhaps exotic", while the less privileged prefer "traditional Danish dishes". In general, the preferences of the privileged are to less popular and more exclusive choices, notably in reading preferences, and also use of the city's facilities. In Britain, where being "ordinary" carries considerable cultural weight, it seemed to be even more unusual for anyone other than members of the elite, even those from educated backgrounds, to openly espouse the rare or distinctive, which might be deemed to be "snobbish".
6. *The expensive versus the cheap.* In Denmark, the opposition is most visible in relation to whether one characterizes one's home as having an "exclusive" style and having "designer furniture" or not, and in whether or not one cares about the price when buying food for guests. In Britain, this takes the form of a liking for lavish entertainment—for instance the tendency of the wealthy to eat in French restaurants while also expressing a strong aversion to fast food. Of course, what is expensive is also rarer than what is cheap, but what is rare is not necessarily expensive; these two oppositions are not identical.
7. *Conspicuous or inclusive.* The answers in the Danish study to questions about serving "new and exotic" dishes and being careless about the price were opposed to answers stressing that "one would never serve something one was not certain the guests would enjoy". While being conspicuous in the matter of food choice relates to having a preference for what is expensive and/or what is rare, the inclusive choices are not only made of necessity (because one cannot afford the expensive alternatives), but out of care for one's guests.
8. *Taste and distaste.* In both studies, it is important to recognise that some of the choices regarding art, musical artists and TV-programs do not distinguish between social groups: these

choices enjoy a general popularity. In the Danish study, however, there are some choices that only people with low stocks of cultural capital make—including liking to listen to Tamra Rosanes (soft C&W) or Kandis (Danish pop); reading family weekly magazines, Danielle Steel or Jane Aamund (romantic novels and family histories); or admitting to prefer art, “where you can see what it represents”. In the UK study, there are fewer items to which those with low cultural capital holdings appear to be disproportionately drawn. In both nations, however, while those lacking cultural capital respond to typical highbrow choices with ignorance or indifference, the culturally privileged express explicit distaste and contempt for what they deem to be the most specific choices of the subordinate groups.

9. *International versus local or national orientation.* This is a very intriguing opposition that we see in both nations—in areas as diverse as TV-preferences, musical likes, food consumption and political attitudes (on the British case, see also [Savage et al., 2010](#)). On one side, we find individuals who orient themselves globally in these matters. In the Danish case, they make use of the Internet to seek information and communicate; they have “cosmopolitan” preferences for food and music; and these cultural preferences go together with political attitudes—like rejecting that one ought to hire natives before immigrants when jobs are scarce; supporting aid to developing countries; and denying any pride in being Danish or of coming from Aalborg. On the other are people with more local and national orientations. In the British case, we find younger professionals espousing cosmopolitan reference points that they often associate with Anglophone (mainly North American or Australasian) music, literature, television and film, as well as distancing themselves from British (and also continental European) forms.

The 6th opposition may be linked to the economically advantaged groups, and partly the 5th and the 7th, too, while all the other six features are clearly linked to cultural privileges (where they are associated with respondents’ own or parents’ level of education). But when this is said, how can one proceed to say which of these oppositions are the most important, and how do these different features relate together? The oppositions are not mutually exclusive. Still, the first opposition (participation/non-participation), the second (knowledge/ignorance), and the last (local/international) come out as particularly strong in the analyses, and they crosscut various forms of cultural consumption.

## 5. From observations of oppositions to statements about cultural capital

After this depiction of cultural landscapes full of significant and systematic differences the next—and difficult—question to address is as follows: how can one move from oppositions observed to a characterization of the content of them as related to cultural capital? To put this another way, is it possible to move beyond observations about the patterning of cultural tastes and practices to a recognition of the forces structuring the relationships between them? This is a key step if we are to define these oppositions as forms of cultural capital. For this step to be taken, signs of at least one of the following should be found: (1) The oppositions should be used amongst people to classify others and/or to identify themselves, thereby showing that the oppositions are part of a relational, field specific, position taking. (2) The most privileged preferences should enjoy a wider recognition as particularly valuable, thereby making them into signs of domination and symbolic violence.

Opposition number 8 above, about taste and distaste, shows that there are indeed some processes of classification of people going on here, in the sense that the culturally privileged draw lines between themselves and those with least cultural capital, but perhaps as many such lines are

also drawn on moral or political grounds (cf. Skjott-Larsen, in press). This is confirmed in Skjott-Larsen's (2008) qualitative follow-up of the survey analysis, which shows that these boundaries are more strongly articulated in relation to opposition number 9, between the local and the international orientations, where the culturally privileged, often more directly than in other matters, express their strong disapproval of people who are nationalist, racist, provincial or lacking an open mind. These interviews—together with Faber's (2008), which also were conducted in relation to the survey—actually reveal that moral oppositions seem to be more important than purely cultural oppositions. In these interviews there are not, however, many signs of a wider recognition of the culturally privileged people's preferences. The expressions of feelings of domination or symbolic violence are not very explicit either, but the interviews with less privileged informants reveal a consciousness of their position in a hierarchy, and their avoidance of certain social settings where they would feel inferior to people who live in "other spheres" than themselves, etc., as class differences are usually worded in euphemized forms (cf. Faber and Prieur, forthcoming).

So is it possible to say that the oppositions found are related to (new) forms of cultural capital? One approach here might be to recognise that these oppositions play a role in class formation, through their overlap with forms of social capital. The reasoning runs as follows in the Danish study (for instance, in Prieur and Rosenlund, 2010): the class structuring of tastes (and opinions) inclines people to choose as friends and partners people who have the same tastes (and opinions) as themselves, as well as to settle in neighbourhoods with people who resemble themselves, and to put their children in schools with children from the same background as themselves. This does not only work for the privileged; the less privileged also have preferences for socializing with people who resemble themselves. Taste patterns may thus contribute to class formation and class reproduction through processes of inclusion and exclusion, or social closure.

This is similar to the British study, which also found that cultural capital was implicated in class formation. The authors thus found that some cultural assets serve as means for gaining social capital for the elite ("Legitimate culture . . . oils the wheels of social connections". Bennett et al., 2009, p. 253). This may also explain why women's seemingly higher levels of knowledge and participation in the cultural field does not necessarily translate to higher social positions, i.e., does not necessarily work as a capital in the sense that it is not as readily convertible into social capital). Thus, we could say that some forms of culture seem to work as cultural capital within the field of power, but we have not seen that this capital also works within the social space. The British study concludes that "few draw parallels between cultural and social worth" (Bennett et al., 2009, p. 259), actually one of the rare references to the difficult question of attribution of value.

How has cultural capital changed? Part of Bennett et al.'s (2009) argument is that the relationship between the historical canon and cultural novelty has changed since Bourdieu's (1984) account in *Distinction*, so that the field-specific stakes have been redefined. Rather than legitimate culture being defined through its association with historically established cultural forms—or, as in the case of the avant garde, being seen as a critique of such traditional forms—Bennett et al. (2009) argue that most contemporary Britons now valorise contemporary culture. Especially in the area of musical taste, the most intensely discussed cultural reference points are present-day ones, rather than historical, which are referred to only in a shadowy or vague way.

Rather than the intense areas within fields being defined in terms of a legitimate culture, which occupies the privileged location within the field, engaged zones are defined in terms of contemporary forms. The "high ground" is associated with versatility and novelty. (Bennett et al., 2009, p. 173)

This argument is developed with reference to new cultural domains, such as the media, which make traditional forms of cultural capital less overt than in the area of music, the visual arts, and literature that form the focus of Bourdieu's own analysis. Thus, the conclusion to the chapter on the media field states that (Bennett et al., 2009, p. 151): "In comparison with the field of visual art, electronic media consumption, and especially television, contributes less to the accumulation of cultural capital". One reason given is the lack of exclusivity, another the relative weakness of those forms of institutional guardianship that govern the core of activities within the art field, for instance. Further, rapid social and cultural changes are said to not easily allow for the establishment of an agreed value. "The media could, in principle, and probably does to some degree, serve as a source for acquiring technical, emotional and sub-cultural capital, and it plays a role in the definition of national capital, but without being a great force for the formation of a cultural hierarchy" (Bennett et al., 2009, p. 151).

## 6. Concluding discussion

In this paper, we have argued for a field-analytic concept of capital. Fields are arenas for social struggles over the attribution of value, or, more precisely, over both the distribution and the definition of the forms of capital that are specific to particular fields. A field is therefore always in motion, and the qualities of a capital cannot be made once and for all: they will be challenged. We have argued that Bourdieu's use of field analysis is precisely designed to avoid defining certain kinds of cultural attributes as inherently part of cultural capital, as an ongoing contestation between social agents can affect the very stakes around which forms of cultural distinction are defined.

We have argued for key commonalities in our Danish and British comparison. To be sure, it is true that the Danish team finds greater differentiation (on the second axis) between cultural capital and economic capital (as Bourdieu found in *Distinction*) than the British team. This might lead casual readers to think that the Danish study is somehow "closer" to Bourdieu than the British. In this paper, we have resisted this argument and pointed to significant similarities. For the differences in their MCAs largely reflect different operational decisions about what variables to use to construct the social and lifestyle spaces, and their findings should not be reified. The British study included more questions about music, which was likely to bring out age as an important dimension in the MCA. But we should not draw the empiricist conclusion that this therefore means cultural capital is differently organised in the two nations.

We have suggested the value of recognising how different kinds of cultural oppositions can be linked to a field analytical perspective on cultural capital that is attentive to its historical contestation and redefinition. Here, rather than focusing on certain cultural attributes as inherently constitutive of cultural capital, we examine how cultural oppositions can bestow advantage vis-à-vis others within the cultural field in terms of (a) having legitimacy or enjoying a wider recognition as coveted forms of cultural practice; (b) being convertible to other assets or capitals; and/or (c) being linked to forms of domination. Here, the higher classes' culture may still work as cultural capital if it is convertible to other forms of capital, i.e., economic and/or social capital. Some of these cultural oppositions are institutionalised, and permit the accumulation and convertibility of advantage between fields. We can summarise three key elements of these commonalities.

Fundamentally, in both studies, we have shown how cultural participation itself is a key axis of division. This principle, it can be argued, is itself central to contemporary labour market and

welfare provision: it is vital to be seen to be “doing something” if one is to make plausible claims (whether for welfare benefit, promotion, or social recognition). Those who speak from a position of disengagement have far fewer resources at their disposal to these ends. It is vital, however, not to take this opposition at face value. Those disengaged from formal cultural activity often have intense social lives and cultural practices which somehow “slip through the net” of formal recognition. And this, we might say, is precisely our point. Whereas historically cultural capital was defined explicitly in opposition to popular culture, it now encompasses items from popular repertoires. This recognition has similarities with Savage et al.’s (2007) and Skeggs’ (2004) claims about cultural recognition itself, all forms of which are associated with the knowing, educated, middle classes. Here, the fact that the lower classes have a degree of cultural autonomy, and do not show many signs of admiration for the higher classes’ tastes or competences, can be seen as precisely consistent with the operation of relative cultural capital itself.

Secondly, we see a focus on the “new” as being central to claims about cultural engagement. This can include a wide-ranging embrace of new technologies, cultural forms, value systems and such like. It links to the power of scientific and technical forms of capital, such as those excavated by Savage (2010) in the British case. None of our oppositions see the embrace of historical, canonical cultural forms as central to cultural superiority. Rather, it is the emergent that conveys cultural stakes. We can see this with respect to the excitement of British audiences in new media and music. We see this also in terms of the concerns of both the Danish and British middle classes to embrace cosmopolitan identities and distance themselves from “old fashioned” national cultural forms. In *Distinction*, Bourdieu (1984) wrote about the divisions within the dominant class between the old fractions based on heritage and traditions and the new fractions based on education, being younger in age and with a taste for the new forms of international culture. However, this “new bourgeoisie” that was upcoming at his time may be in the central position now. We can see this shift as associated with the institutions of the cultural industries, through the marketing of novel cultural forms, as well as the concern of cultural institutions such as museums and art galleries to emphasise temporary exhibitions to bring in new audiences.

Finally, we can note the existence of “telling markers” that might give away the fact that a person might not be truly omnivorous. Even though the middle classes range between types, there are still a few indicators of bad taste that are either avoided, or if they are embraced, this is done in a “knowing” and ironic way. These are not always specific cultural genres, but can be specific programs or cultural artefacts, and need careful unravelling. The people who are marked out here are those who do not have the background knowledge to know the cultural coding of certain artefacts. It is an indicator that one is “out of touch”. Hence, it is the mode of appropriation of cultural products which is central.

These three commonalities, we suggest, offer a more comprehensive and subtle way of teasing out the operation of cultural capital today. It sidesteps frequent criticisms of the concept, for instance that because a liking for classical music is more commonly combined with a liking for popular music, this means that cultural capital is declining. It is also not justified to dismiss the existence of cultural capital only on the grounds that people employ other kinds of distinctions in their drawing of boundaries, for instance on moral grounds. Bourdieu (1984) showed how working-class men displayed autonomy in their judgments of themselves as more masculine than men from the higher classes. These judgments, however, for all the self esteem and dignity they may provide their holders, serve to exclude them from the educational system and thereby also from money and power. Therefore, they may well be linked to social domination even if they are not identified as such by the participants.



## Acknowledgments

The authors want to thank the editors, the anonymous reviewers and our colleagues in the SCUD-network for valuable comments to earlier drafts for this article.

## References

- Bennett, T., 2005. The historical universal: the role of cultural value in the historical sociology of Pierre Bourdieu. *British Journal of Sociology* 56, 141–164.
- Bennett, T., Savage, M., Silva, E., Warde, A., Gayo-Cal, M., Wright, D., 2009. *Culture, Class, Distinction*. Routledge, London.
- Bourdieu, P., 1984. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*. Routledge & Kegan Paul, London.
- Bourdieu, P., 1986. The forms of capital. In: Richardson, J.G. (Ed.), *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*. Greenwood, New York, pp. 241–258.
- Bourdieu, P., 1998. *Practical Reason: On the Theory of Action*. Polity, Cambridge, UK.
- Bourdieu, P., 2003. *Firing Back: Against the Tyranny of the Market*. Verso, London.
- Bourdieu, P., Passeron, J.-C., 1979 [1964]. *The Inheritors: French Students and Their Relation to Culture*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago.
- Bourdieu, P., Passeron, J.-C., 1996 [1970]. *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture*. Sage, London.
- Bourdieu, P., Wacquant, L., 1992. *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago.
- Chan, T.W. (Ed.), 2010. *Social Status and Cultural Consumption*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK.
- Chan, T.W., Goldthorpe, J.H., 2005. Social stratification and cultural consumption: theatre, dance and cinema attendance. *Cultural Trends* 14, 193–212.
- Chan, T.W., Goldthorpe, J.H., 2007. Social stratification and cultural consumption: music in England. *European Sociological Review* 2, 1–19.
- Crompton, R., 2008. *Class and Stratification*. Polity, Cambridge, UK.
- Faber, S.T., 2008. *På jagt efter klasse*. PhD Dissertation, Aalborg University, Department of Sociology and Social Work.
- Faber, S.T., Prieur, A., forthcoming. *Discreet Distinctions in Denmark: On Representations of Class in a Presumptively Classless Society*. Working paper, CASTOR, Aalborg University.
- Fowler, B., 1997. *Pierre Bourdieu and Cultural Theory: Critical Investigations*. Sage, London.
- Goldthorpe, J.H., 1980. *Social Mobility and the Class Structure in Modern Britain*. Clarendon, Oxford, UK.
- Goldthorpe, J.H., 2007. Cultural capital, some critical observations. *Sociologica: Italian Journal of Sociology Online*, <http://www.sociologica.mulino.it/doi/10.2383/24755>.
- Grenfell, M., 2010. Working with habitus and field: the logic of Bourdieu's practice. In: Silva, E., Warde, A. (Eds.), *Cultural Analysis and Bourdieu's Legacy*. Routledge, London, pp. 14–27.
- Holt, D.B., 1997. Distinction in America? Recovering Bourdieu's theory of tastes from its critics. *Poetics* 25, 93–120.
- Kingston, P.W., 2001. The unfulfilled promise of cultural capital theory. *Sociology of Education (Extra Issue)*, 88–99.
- Lamont, M., Lareau, A., 1988. Cultural capital: allusions, gaps and glissandos in recent theoretical developments. *Sociological Theory* 6, 153–168.
- Lareau, A., Weininger, E.B., 2003. Cultural capital in educational research: a critical assessment. *Theory and Society* 32, 567–606.
- LeRoux, B., Rouanet, H., Savage, M., Warde, A., 2008. Class and cultural division in the UK. *Sociology* 42, 1049–1071.
- Lizardo, O., 2008. The question of culture: consumption and stratification revisited. *Sociologica: Italian Journal of Sociology Online*, <http://www.sociologica.mulino.it/doi/10.2383/27709>.
- Marshall, G., Newby, H., Rose, D., Vogler, C., 1988. *Social Class in Modern Britain*. Unwin Hyman, London.
- Peterson, R.A., Kern, R.M., 1996. Changing highbrow taste: from snob to omnivore. *American Sociological Review* 61, 900–907.
- Peterson, R., Simkus, A., 1992. How musical taste mark occupational status groups. In: Lamont, M., Fournier, M. (Eds.), *Cultivating Differences: Symbolic Boundaries and the Making of Inequality*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago, pp. 152–186.
- Prieur, A., Rosenlund, L., Skjøtt-Larsen, J., 2008. Cultural capital today: a case study from Denmark. *Poetics* 36, 45–71.
- Prieur, A., Rosenlund, L., 2010. Kulturelle skel i Danmark. *Dansk Sociologi* 21, 47–78.
- Robbins, D., 2005. The origins, early development and status of Bourdieu's concept of "cultural capital". *British Journal of Sociology* 56, 13–30.



- Savage, M., 2010. *Identities and Social Change in Britain since 1940: The Politics of Method*. Oxford University Press, Oxford, UK.
- Savage, M., Gayo, M., 2011. Unravelling the omnivore: a field analysis of contemporary musical taste in the United Kingdom. *Poetics* 39, 337–357.
- Savage, M., Warde, A., Devine, F., 2005. Capitals, assets and resources: some critical issues. *British Journal of Sociology* 56, 31–48.
- Savage, M., Warde, A., Devine, F., 2007. Comment on Goldthorpe. *Sociologica: Italian Journal of Sociology*. Online. <http://www.sociologica.mulino.it/journal/article/index/Article/Journal:ARTICLE:103/Item/Journal:ARTICLE:103>
- Savage, M., Wright, D., Gayo-Cal, M., 2010. Cosmopolitan nationalism and the cultural reach of the white British. *Nations and Nationalism* 16 (4), 598–615.
- Skeggs, B., 2004. *Culture, Class, Self*. Routledge, London.
- Skjott-Larsen, J., 2008. *Social differentiering i det postindustrielle*. PhD Dissertation, Aalborg University, Department of Sociology and Social Work.
- Skjott-Larsen, J., forthcoming. Cultural and moral class boundaries in a Nordic context: findings from a city in Denmark. *European Societies*.
- Warde, A., 2007. Does taste still serve power? The fate of distinction in Britain. *Sociologica: Italian Journal of Sociology Online*, <http://www.sociologica.mulino.it/doi/10.2383/25945>.
- Warde, A., Savage, M., 2009. Il capital cultural e l'analisi sociologica della cultura: una reinterpretazione. In: Santoro, M. (Ed.), *Cultura in Italia: La Cultura come Capitale: Consume, Produzioni, Politiche, Identita*. Societa Editrice il Mulino, Bologna, pp. 27–50.
- Weininger, E.B., 2005. Foundations of Pierre Bourdieu's class analysis. In: Wright, E.O. (Ed.), *Approaches to Class Analysis*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK, pp. 119–149.

**Annick Prieur** (Dr.polit) is a professor in sociology at the Department of Sociology and Social Work, University of Aalborg, Denmark, and also affiliated with the Department of Criminology and Sociology of Law, University of Oslo. She has worked on questions related to social differentiation in Denmark for the last years, and has also coordinated the European SCUD-network (Network for the Studies of Social and Cultural Distinctions).

**Mike Savage** (FBA, AcSS) is professor of Sociology and Head of Department at the University of York. His recent books include *Culture, Class Distinction* (with Tony Bennett, Elizabeth Silva, Alan Warde, Modesto Gayo-Cal and David Wright; Routledge, 2009) and *Identities and Social Change in Britain since 1940: The Politics of Method* (Oxford University Press, 2010).