

CHAPTER 4.
PIERRE BOURDIEU ON SOCIAL CLASS AND
SYMBOLIC VIOLENCE

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At the time of his death in January 2002, Pierre Bourdieu was perhaps the most prominent sociologist in the world (see Calhoun and Wacquant 2002). As the author of numerous classic works, he had become a necessary reference point in various “specialty” areas throughout the discipline (including education, culture, “theory,” and the sociology of knowledge); he had also achieved canonical status in cultural anthropology as a result of his studies of the Kabyle in northern Algeria during the war for independence and its aftermath.¹ Nevertheless, Bourdieu’s prominence increased exponentially during the 1990s, when he became a highly visible participant in political struggles against the neoliberal orthodoxy that was coming to dominate political discourse in Continental Europe (see Bourdieu 1998a; 2001a).²

Social class constitutes a fundamental analytic category in of much of Bourdieu’s research—so much so that he is routinely included in lists of leading contemporary class theorists. Yet despite this centrality, the particular understanding of this concept that animates his work remains murky in the secondary literature. There are, in fact, a number of reasons why it is unusually difficult to grasp:

- Neither Bourdieu’s understanding of class nor his more general conceptual apparatus can be identified with a single “father figure”—whether this be Marx, Weber, Durkheim, or some

¹ For a general introduction to Bourdieu’s work, see Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992), as well as Swartz (1997), Brubaker (1985), and the essays collected in Calhoun, LiPuma, and Postone (1993).

² Political involvement, however, was not new to Bourdieu (see 2002).

lesser-known luminary—or with a self-contained tradition descending from such a figure. To the contrary, on the question of class, as on most other questions, Bourdieu borrowed as needed from the sociological canon.

- Bourdieu was deeply opposed to the separation of theory and research—to such an extent that nearly all of his conceptual innovations were developed only in the context of concrete empirical analyses. This creates numerous difficulties for any discussion charged with providing a “foundational” account of his approach to class or any other sociological object.³ Analytic propositions must be extracted from instances of their application with as little distortion as possible. Furthermore, it is necessary, particularly when undertaking such an account in a place or time different from that in which Bourdieu wrote, to untangle the substance of these propositions from the peculiarities of the context to which they were applied.
- Bourdieu eschewed the “positivistic” methodological orientations that have become entrenched in much English-language class analysis: within an *oeuvre* that spans thousands of pages, one will find almost no reliance on standard multivariate techniques. At the same time, however, he did not simply advocate “qualitative” methods. Instead, his research draws an amalgamation of quantitative and interpretive data. Because the explanatory logic underlying this use of data is neither familiar nor obvious, his argumentation can be difficult to follow.
- In contrast to various prominent schools of contemporary class analysis, Bourdieu did not make use of rational action theory. Indeed, his account of social class is distinguished from these

³ Bourdieu was generally skeptical of attempts to work out the theoretical logic underlying his works in isolation from their empirical deployment (referring derisively to such attempts as “scholasticism”). Nevertheless, he did undertake, albeit tentatively, the theoretical clarification of various concepts. On the question of social class, these include (Bourdieu 1987; 1990b, pp. 122-139; 1991, pp. 229-251; 1998b, 1-18).

schools on two grounds. First, his theory of action revolved around the concept of “habitus,” defined as a socially constituted system of dispositions that orient “thoughts, perceptions, expressions, and actions” (Bourdieu 1990a, p. 55). In Bourdieu’s sociology, action generated by the habitus can certainly approximate that specified by rational action theory, but only when situated within a social context sufficiently similar to that in which the habitus was formed. Rationality, in other words, is “socially bounded” in his view (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 126; Bourdieu 1990a, pp. 63-64). Secondly, however, Bourdieu’s approach to social class also reserved an essential place for the analysis of symbolic systems—an element which typically finds little or no place in models predicated on the assumption of rational action.

Given these obstacles, an elaboration of Bourdieu’s approach to social class cannot be reduced to the presentation of a list of axiomatic propositions. To the contrary, such an elaboration must, first and foremost, take as its point of departure a concrete exercise in class analysis. In Bourdieu’s case, this implies a focus on the now-classic study, Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste (originally published in 1979). It is in the context of an examination of this study (supplemented, to be sure, by a consideration of relevant earlier and later works) that we can confront Bourdieu’s unique conceptual apparatus and his uncharacteristic methods for handling data.

I. Preliminary Themes

Based on data collected in France in the 1960s and 1970s, Distinction takes as its object the relation between social classes and status groups—with the latter understood, following Weber, in the sense of collectivities defined by a uniformity of lifestyle.⁴ Before proceeding to a discussion of the text, however, two basic concerns can be specified

⁴ As Weber put it, “status honor is normally expressed by the fact that above all else a specific style of life can be expected from those who wish to belong to the circle” (1958, p. 187).

that motivate many of the unique features of Bourdieu's approach to class. These relate to 1) the significance and role of the analysis of symbolic systems in class analysis, and 2) the question of boundaries between classes.

In an early article that sketched many of the arguments which later appeared in Distinction, Bourdieu explicitly takes up Weber's well-known account of "class" and "status group":

everything seems to indicate that Weber opposes class and status group as two types of real unities which would come together more or less frequently according to the type of society...; [however,] to give Weberian analyses all of their force and impact, it is necessary to see them instead as nominal unities...which are always the result of a choice to accent the economic aspect or the symbolic aspect—aspects which always coexist in the same reality.... (Bourdieu 1966, pp. 212-213; my addition; emphases modified)

Bourdieu thus interprets Weber's contrast between class and status in terms of a distinction between the material (or "economic") and the symbolic. He maintains, moreover, that these should not be viewed as alternative types of stratification giving rise to different types of social collectivities. To the contrary, the distinction between class and status group must be seen purely as an analytical convenience—one which Bourdieu, moreover, is inclined to disallow. The upshot of this is an insistence that class analysis can not be reduced to the analysis of economic relations; rather, it simultaneously entails an analysis of symbolic relations, roughly along the lines of the "status communities" referred to by Weber.

In addition to asserting that class analysis has both an economic and a symbolic dimension, Bourdieu also rejects one of the most fundamental aspects of class theory: the imperative to demarcate classes from one another a priori. The reasons behind this rejection are apparent in remarks such as the following:

[n]umerous studies of “social classes”...merely elaborate the practical questions which are forced on those who hold political power. Political leaders are continually faced with the...practical imperatives which arise from the logic of the struggle within the political field, such as...the need to mobilize the greatest possible number of votes while at the same time asserting the irreducibility of their project to those of other leaders. Thus they are condemned to raise the problem of the social world in the typically substantialist logic of the boundaries between groups and the size of the mobilizable group.... (Bourdieu 1991, p. 246)

Bourdieu was led to disassociate the sociology of class from the project of theoretically specifying boundaries between classes for a number of reasons. In the first place, argumentation over the boundary separating one social collectivity from another is a fundamental form of political conflict, and Bourdieu adhered throughout his career to a vision of social science which repudiated the amalgamation of political and scientific interest (on this point, see also Donnelly 1997).⁵ Secondly, he contends that by drawing boundaries ahead of time, sociologists also run the risk (in their research practice, and possibly even their theory) of treating classes as “self-subsistent entities...which come ‘preformed,’ and only then... [enter into] dynamic flows....” (Emirbayer 1997, p.283)—or in other words, according to a “substantialist” logic. Both of these objections stem, in part, from Bourdieu’s antipathy towards arguments (frequent during 1960s and 1970s) over the “real” lines of division separating classes—above all, those separating the “middle class” from the proletariat—and the political implications of the location of these lines. Against the fundamental premises of such arguments, Bourdieu insists vehemently that “the question with which all sociology ought to

⁵ Thus, in *Distinction*, Bourdieu declares that “many of the words which sociology uses to designate the classes it constructs are borrowed from ordinary usage, where they serve to express the (generally polemical) view that one group has of another” (Bourdieu 1984, p. 169).

begin” is “that of the existence...and mode of existence of collectives” (Bourdieu 1991, 250). As will be seen, the implication of this question is that boundaries must be understood in terms of social practices rather than theoretical conjecture.

Having identified these fundamental concerns, we may turn to a discussion of Distinction. The following section (II) will provide an initial sketch of Bourdieu's understanding of class, one that, of necessity, abstracts from its full complexity. This will serve to bring into focus the dogged manner in which he pursues the question of “the existence...and mode of existence of collectives.” In doing so, it will also necessarily introduce elements from Bourdieu's formidable conceptual arsenal—including the central notions of capital, habitus, and field.⁶ The subsequent section (III) will return to issues that were initially left aside in order to provide a more comprehensive view. In particular, it will take up the subject of how different forms of social domination are related to one another in Bourdieu's work, and how his views evolved over the course of his career.

II. An Outline of Bourdieu's Theory of Class

Bourdieu describes Distinction as “an endeavor to rethink Max Weber's opposition between class and Stand” (1984, p. xii). As we have seen, this endeavor had occupied him since the 1960s, in particular because it raised the question of the relation between the economic and the symbolic. In Bourdieu's view, differences of status (that is, of lifestyle) may be seen as manifestations of social class differences. To evaluate this proposition, he devises an explanatory argument which postulates, first, a causal connection between class location and “habitus”; and, secondly, a relation of “expression” between habitus and a variety of practices situated in different domains of consumption—practices which cohere symbolically to form a whole (a

⁶ These concepts have become the object of extensive (if not endless) meta-theoretical debate. For the purposes of this chapter, these debates can be safely left to the side. Those who wish to pursue such matters may consult (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992), and the many sources cited therein.

“style of life”). Thirdly, however, Bourdieu further asserts that these practices serve to constitute social collectivities—that is, “status groups”—by establishing symbolic boundaries between individuals occupying different locations in the class structure. The process through which this occurs is a contentious one, taking the form of what he calls a “classificatory struggle.” And, finally, Bourdieu demonstrates that this struggle amounts to only one of the many modalities through which “symbolic power” is exercised.

Class Structure

To start with, it must be recognized that for Bourdieu, the notion of a class structure encompasses the entirety of the occupational division of labor. This implies that he grants the notion a considerably wider purview than do Marxian theories, which restrict its scope to a system of positions defined in terms of ownership of and/or control over the means of production. Consequently, Bourdieu is not confronted by the problem upon which so many Marxian theories have foundered—namely, that of determining how to cope with all those positions in the division of labor which cannot be characterized in terms of the canonical division between “owners” and “workers” (or which cannot be characterized “adequately” or “satisfactorily” in these terms). Thus, his model effectively encompasses not only the “middle class” occupations that have been the source of so much grief in the Marxist tradition, but also those which have hovered at the fringes of most class analytical schemes, including positions in public administration and the state “apparatus,” the so-called “professions,” and—not least of all—intellectuals, artists, and other “cultural producers.”

In Bourdieu's understanding, the occupational division of labor forms a system. This implies that locations in the division of labor are differentiated from—and thus related to—one another in terms of theoretically meaningful factors. For Bourdieu, these factors derive from the distributions of “capital.” Bourdieu regards as capital “the set of actually usable resources and powers” (1984, p. 114). He insists, moreover, that there exist multiple species of capital which cannot be subsumed under a single generic concept. In the present context, the most important of these are economic and cultural capital (see Bourdieu

1986; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, pp. 117-120).⁷ Whereas Bourdieu tended to treat the meaning of the former concept as more or less self-evident throughout the course his career, the latter was the object of extensive elaboration (and has given rise to extensive debate). Put simply, the notion of cultural capital merely refers to a culturally-specific “competence,” albeit one which is efficacious—as a “resource” or a “power”—in a particular social setting. In highly differentiated societies, two social agencies are primarily responsible for “inculcating” cultural capital: the family and the school. Its most fundamental feature lies in the fact that, because it is embodied, its acquisition requires an investment of time (Bourdieu 1986, p. 244-6).⁸

Bourdieu thus develops his model of the class structure by means of an analysis of survey data which includes a wide variety of indicators of the economic and cultural capital possessed by individuals located in positions throughout the occupational system. The model may be understood as a factorial space constituted by three orthogonal axes.⁹

⁷ Bourdieu is well-known for also having identified a third form of capital: “social capital” (see Bourdieu 1986). This form of capital is of secondary importance in the analysis of capitalist societies for Bourdieu; it took on a more central role, however, in his occasional discussions of state socialist societies (see Bourdieu 1998b, pp. 14-18).

⁸ Cultural capital may also occur in an “objectified” form—that is, in the form of material objects whose production or consumption presupposes a quantum of embodied cultural capital. And, it may occur in an “institutionalized” form, meaning as an embodied competence which has been certified by an official agency possessing the authority to legally “warrant” its existence—that is, in the form of educational credentials (Bourdieu 1986). One of the foremost characteristics of cultural capital, for Bourdieu, is heritability; as such, it can make a substantial contribution to the inter-generational reproduction of the distribution of individuals across class locations, since “the social conditions of its transmission and acquisition are more disguised than those of economic capital” (Bourdieu 1986, p. 245).

⁹ Bourdieu's preferred statistical technique is Multiple Correspondence Analysis (MCA), a technique similar to factor analysis, but used with categorical

The first (and most important) axis differentiates locations in the occupational system according to the total volume of capital (economic and cultural) possessed by incumbents. For Bourdieu, class location is a function of position on this axis. Thus, his data indicate that members of occupational categories such as industrialists, private sector executives, and college professors occupy overlapping positions at the upper end of the axis, and hence share the same class location; Bourdieu thus refers to these categories collectively as the “dominant class” (or sometimes the “bourgeoisie”). Similarly, manual workers and farm laborers occupy overlapping positions at the other end of the axis, indicating that they share a class location opposed to the occupations making up the dominant class; these categories are collectively designated the “working class” (or “les classes populaires”). In between, we find overlapping occupational categories such as small business owners, technicians, secretaries, and primary school teachers, which are collectively termed the “petty bourgeoisie” (see Bourdieu 1984, pp. 128-129).

The second axis in the factorial space differentiates positions within class locations. Bourdieu refers to opposed positions along this axis with the Marxian vocabulary of “class fractions.” This terminology, however, should not be interpreted according to Marxian theories, as the meaning he attributes to it falls well outside the scope of Marxism. For Bourdieu, classes are divided internally according to the composition of the capital possessed by incumbents—that is, the relative preponderance of economic or cultural capitals within “the set of actually usable resources and powers.” Thus, occupational categories within the dominant class are differentiated from one another such that professors and “artistic producers”—the occupations whose incumbents hold the

variables. One characteristic of MCA which is of particular interest to him is the fact that individual cases retain their categorical “identities” within the factorial space. This makes it possible to plot the dispersion of the members of each occupational category within the space (see the summary results of such an analysis provided in Bourdieu 1984, pp. 128-9, and for “full” models, pp. 262, 340). For an interesting discussion of Bourdieu’s use of MCA, see Rouanet, Ackermann, and Le Roux (2000).

greatest cultural capital and the least economic capital—are opposed to industrialists and commercial employers—the occupations whose incumbents hold a preponderance of economic capital but relatively little cultural capital. Located in between these two polar extremes are the professions, whose incumbents exhibit a relatively symmetrical asset structure. In a similar manner, the petty bourgeoisie is differentiated along the second axis between the small business owners, endowed primarily with economic capital, and primary school teachers, endowed primarily with cultural capital. Intermediate between them are categories such as technicians, office workers, and secretaries.¹⁰

The occupational division of labor is differentiated along a third axis, one which amounts to a quasi-structural treatment of time. Generated primarily from indicators of the economic and cultural capital of the family of origin, this axis differentiates positions according to the trajectories followed by their incumbents—or in other words, according to the change or stability they have experienced over time in the volume and composition of their capital. Here Bourdieu's data reveal, for example, that members of the professions are more likely than any other members of the bourgeoisie to have been born into this class. His approach, it can be noted, opens up an intriguing area for the study of mobility: in addition to vertical movements (along the first axis), mobility may also entail “horizontal” or “transverse” movements (along the second axis)—that is, an individual's class location and his or her fraction location are simultaneously variable over time. Bourdieu refers to the latter type of movement, in which a preponderance of one type of asset gives way to a preponderance of the other, as a “conversion” of capitals.¹¹

¹⁰ Bourdieu is incapable of differentiating fractions within the working class on the basis of his available data; he remains strongly convinced, however, that better data would enable him to draw such a contrast (Bourdieu 1984, p. 115).

¹¹ Mobility along the “horizontal” axis of the structure is governed by what Bourdieu calls the prevailing “conversion rate” between the different capitals (for example, the prevailing costs or returns associated with education). This

The model that Bourdieu constructs of occupational division of labor in this manner is intended to be understood as a structure of objective positions—that is, as locations which are “occupied” by individuals, but which exist as a “quasi reality” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, p. 27) independently of them. As such, Bourdieu terms it the social space of the social formation under analysis. It is meant to represent a single system of objective relations between the various possible combinations of the most important “powers and resources” in the social formation, and their evolution over time. As such, it stands at considerable distance from those developed by the more familiar traditions of class analysis. In particular, Bourdieu’s social space is separated from them by the fact that the three axes which constitute it—volume, composition, and trajectory—are viewed as continuous dimensions, from both a methodological and a theoretical vantage point (Bourdieu 1990a, p. 140). This implies that the model does not postulate any inherent lines of cleavage specifying the structural threshold where one class gives way to another, and hence, that within “this universe of continuity,” the identification of discrete class (and fraction) locations amounts to no more than a heuristic convenience (see Bourdieu 1984, pp. 258-259, 339). Correlatively, although the fact that Bourdieu conceptualizes social space in gradational terms appears to echo those “stratification” models in which the occupational order is understood as a continuous scale of positions (differentiated, for example, in terms of the rewards they carry), it nevertheless stands far apart from them by virtue of its multidimensional configuration (see Bourdieu 1984, pp. 124-125; also 1991, pp. 244-245). As noted, this opens the way to an analysis of forms of mobility (“conversion” of capital) that such models ignore; and, as will be demonstrated, it also opens the way to an analysis of forms of conflict that such models are incapable of acknowledging.¹²

rate is variable over time, being the product of conflicts between those who hold a preponderance of one or the other species of capital.

¹² As they themselves suggest, Bourdieu’s conception of social space does resemble the “disaggregative” orientation to class analysis developed by Grusky and Sørensen (1998), at least insofar as both center on the occupational system.

Class Habitus

Bourdieu establishes an indirect causal link between positions in social space and practices by means of the concept of habitus, which in his explanatory scheme provides an essential mediation: “social class, understood as a system of objective determinations, must be brought into relation not with the individual or with the ‘class’ as a population, i.e. as an aggregate of...individuals, but with the class habitus (Bourdieu 1977, p. 85, emphases altered). This concept, more than any other in Bourdieu’s repertoire, has given rise to perpetual meta-theoretical debate. In the present context, such debates can be safely ignored, and we can broach the subject of the habitus from a perspective suited to the question of Distinction and the class analysis undertaken there.

Bourdieu describes the fundamental purpose of the concept as that of “escaping both the objectivism of action understood as a mechanical reaction ‘without an agent’ and the subjectivism which portrays action as the deliberate pursuit of a conscious intention...” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, p. 121).¹³ Above all, the notion of habitus designates a socially constituted system of dispositions. As such,

Nevertheless, substantial differences must be recognized. In particular, although Grusky and Sørensen wish to argue that occupational locations share many of the properties traditionally attributed to classes, it is difficult to see how, within their framework, one could speak of an occupational structure—on analogy to the traditional notion of a class structure. This is because they are unwilling to specify a principle (or principles) of variation or of differentiation which could establish theoretically meaningful relations between the total set of locations within the occupational system. Put simply, their approach lacks an analogue to Bourdieu’s identification of volume, composition, and trajectory as the constitutive dimensions of social space. Thus, one might question the general appropriateness of their use the class idiom.

¹³ See also Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992, p. 136): “[t]he notion of habitus accounts for the fact that social agents are neither particles of matter determined by external causes, nor little monads guided solely by internal reasons, executing a sort of perfectly rational internal program of action.”

it implies a view according to which actions are generated neither by explicit consideration of norms (that is, via the conscious subsumption of the action situation under a morally binding “rule”) nor by rational calculation (that is, via calculation of the relative risks and rewards likely to accrue to different possible courses of action). Rather, in keeping with pragmatist philosophies, a dispositional understanding implies that, under “typical” circumstances action can proceed on a pre-reflexive basis—that is, without recourse to conscious reflection on rules or estimations of results. Nevertheless, the notion of habitus is not to be conflated with that of “habit” (in ordinary sense), according to which action would only be able to forego reflection to the extent that it was routinized and repetitive. To the contrary, dispositions may generate actions—or as Bourdieu prefers to say, practices—that are highly spontaneous and inventive. His preferred illustrative examples are taken from music and sports: an accomplished musician is able to improvise within the context of a given harmonic structure without having to mentally rehearse alternative variations prior to actually playing them; similarly, an accomplished tennis player will charge the net in order to win a point without having to weigh the expected consequences of this strategy against others prior to actually engaging it (see Bourdieu 1990b, p. 11; 1990a, pp. 52-65; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, pp. 19-22). To be sure, neither rational calculation nor intentional reference to rules are proscribed in Bourdieu’s meta-theory; nevertheless, they are considered to be a “derivative” form of practice, in the sense that they are most likely to occur when the habitus finds itself compelled to cope with an unfamiliar environment (for example, the classically trained musician who agrees to perform with a jazz ensemble).

The habitus, according to Bourdieu, is differentially formed according to each actor’s position in social space; as such, it is empirically variable and class-specific (in Bourdieu’s sense of the term). In elaborating this, we must begin by acknowledging that, for Bourdieu, the process through which the habitus is constituted is not situated—or at least not primarily situated—at the “point of production.” In other words, although the occupational system comprises the institutional core of the “class structure” for Bourdieu, it is neither the labor market nor the shop floor (or office cubicle) which functions as the site in which the

causal processes giving rise to a class-specific habitus unfold. Rather, according to Bourdieu, each location in social space—that is, each combination of volume and composition of capital—corresponds to a particular set of life conditions, which he terms the “class condition.”¹⁴ As such, it is intended to specify the particular conditions within which the habitus was formed, and in particular, the experience of material necessity.¹⁵ According to Bourdieu, experience of the particular class condition that characterizes a given location in social space imprints a particular set of dispositions upon the individual.

These dispositions amount to what Bourdieu sometimes calls a “generative formula.” He defines them as “an acquired system of generative schemes...[that] makes possible the...production of...thoughts, perceptions and actions” (Bourdieu 1990a, p. 55). These schemes enable actors to apprehend their specific situation and its elements as meaningful, and to pursue—typically without reflection or calculation—a course of action which is “appropriate” to it. (This is why, Bourdieu argues, the regularities of action observed by social scientists often appear to be the result of adherence to norms or rational decision.) This capacity, on the one hand, is limited: the more the action situation departs from the conditions in which the habitus was constituted, the more likely it is that the habitus will be rendered ineffective (a kind of individual anomie). On the other hand, however, the “schemes” comprising the habitus are transposable: within the limits

¹⁴ See Sørensen (this volume) for the distinction between conceptions of class based on the notion of life conditions and those based on the notion of exploitation. In Sørensen’s view, the former require grounding in the latter’s notion of “objective”—but typically “latent”—antagonistic interests in order to account for processes of class formation (e.g. collective action by the members of a class). As will be demonstrated, Bourdieu takes an entirely different view of this process.

¹⁵ Initial formation of the habitus occurs in the context of each individual’s “earliest upbringing.” It can subsequently be modified by new experiences; however, the earliest experiences carry a “disproportionate weight” (Bourdieu 1977, p. 78; 1990a, pp. 54, 60).

constituted by the conditions of their formation, they are fully capable of operating across different domains of social life, and therefore of conferring a unity on practices that are “phenomenally different.” One form in which this unity is realized—and the essential one in Distinction—is the phenomenon of taste.

Class Practices

As we noted above, for Bourdieu, sociology's fundamental question is “that of the existence...and mode of existence of collectives.” One of the assumptions underlying Distinction is the premise that social collectivities are, at present, formed primarily in the arena of consumption. Indeed, this assumption forms the background to Bourdieu's emphasis on the importance of lifestyle. The next step of the explanatory process thus entails analysis of a wide variety of data on practices and preferences in the arena of consumption, including those having to do with “canonized” forms of culture (art, literature, music, theater, etc.) and those that belong to culture in the wider, anthropological sense of the term (food, sports, newspapers, clothing, interior décor, etc.). By performing a correspondence analysis on this data, Bourdieu is able to demonstrate that the various indicators of lifestyle exhibit a structure that is isomorphic with (or as he prefers to say, “homologous” to) that of social space. More specifically, he is able to demonstrate that different preferences and practices cluster in different sectors of social space (Bourdieu 1998b, pp. 4-6).

Because the habitus, as a system of dispositional “schemes,” cannot be directly observed, it must be apprehended interpretively. Much of Distinction is therefore devoted to a qualitative study of the various preferences and practices which cluster in each sector of social space—that is, within each “class” and “fraction”—in order to identify the particular “scheme” or “principle” that underlies them, and which orients the expenditure of economic and cultural capital in a manner that gives rise to the semantic coherence of a lifestyle.¹⁶ Thus, Bourdieu

¹⁶ Bourdieu's facility at teasing out the semantic coherence that obtains across the minutiae of everyday life give rise an analytic richness which, unfortunately, cannot be evoked here.

demonstrates that among the members of the dominant class, a unitary lifestyle emerges around what he calls “the sense of distinction.” This habitus is defined, above all, by its overriding aesthetic sensibility. The various moments of everyday life constitute so many occasions for an expression of this sensibility. In particular, each comprises an opportunity for the subordination of function to form:

[w]hile it is clear that art offers it the greatest scope, there is no area of practice in which the intention of purifying, refining and sublimating facile impulses and primary needs cannot assert itself, or in which the stylization of life, i.e. the primacy of form over function, which leads to the denial of function, does not produce the same effects. In language, it gives the opposition between the popular outspokenness and the highly censored language of the bourgeois.... The same economy of means is found in body language: here too, agitation and haste, grimaces and gesticulation are opposed...to the restraint and impassivity which signify elevation. Even the field of primary tastes is organized according to the primary opposition, with the antithesis between quantity and quality, belly and palate, matter and manners, substance and form. (Bourdieu 1984, pp. 175-176)

As this remark indicates, Bourdieu discerns a working class habitus that is “antithetical” to that of the dominant class: the “taste for necessity” which characterizes the lifestyle of members of this class inclines them to assign an absolute priority to function over form, to insist that art carry a moral message, and to demand choices that evidence a conformity with the class as a whole (which are viewed as an implicit demonstration of solidarity). For its part, the petty bourgeois exhibits a lifestyle born of the combination of an aspiration to the bourgeois lifestyle, on the one hand, and insufficient economic or (especially) cultural capital to attain it, on the other. Its members are therefore inclined to a “cultural goodwill”: lacking “culture” (in the bourgeois sense) they tend to

embrace “popularized” aesthetic forms (e.g. “light” opera) and to commit themselves to activities intended to achieve cultural self-betterment.

Furthermore, Bourdieu demonstrates substantial differences within both the dominant class and the petty bourgeoisie according to variations in the asset structures associated with the corresponding positions (that is, according to the composition of capital).¹⁷ Thus, within the dominant class, those endowed primarily with economic capital—the commercial and industrial employers—express the “sense of distinction” through the pursuit of luxury goods and a carefully crafted opulence, whereas their counterparts—the “artistic producers” and University professors—express this impulse by practicing a cultural “asceticism” geared towards the intellectually most demanding (and least expensive) forms of culture. Bourdieu summarizes this opposition of habitus and lifestyles as follows:

[o]n one side, reading, and reading poetry, philosophical and political works, Le Monde, and the (generally leftish) literary or artistic magazines; on the other, hunting or betting, and when there is reading, reading France-Soir or...Auto-Journal.... On one side, classic or avant-garde theater..., museums, classical music,...the Flea Market, camping, mountaineering or walking; on the other, business trips and expense account lunches, boulevard theater...and music-hall, variety shows on TV,...the auction room and “boutiques,” luxury cars and a boat, three-star hotels and spas. (Bourdieu 1984, p. 283)

Situated in between these two poles of the dominant class are the professionals and (especially) the senior executives, who, eschewing both the overt luxury of the employers and the “asceticism” of the intellectuals, exhibit a lifestyle built around aesthetic commitments to “modernism,” “dynamism,” and “cosmopolitanism”: embracing new technology and open to foreign culture, they view themselves as

¹⁷ Recall (note 10, above) that Bourdieu is unable to clearly identify class fractions in the working class, but insists that this is shortcoming of his data.

“liberated” and espouse a “laid back” way of life (Bourdieu 1984, pp. 295-315). Bourdieu goes on to chart analogous oppositions within the petty bourgeoisie, where variations in the ratio of economic to cultural capital correspond to different “modalities” of its members’ signature “cultural goodwill.” He also adduces numerous qualifications of his characterization of each class’ and fraction’s lifestyle as a result of internal differences in trajectory.

The lifestyles that Bourdieu documents so extensively in *Distinction* pertain to a specific place and time, and thus need not be extensively recounted here (for a discussion that provides some of the historical context, see Lane 2000, pp. 140-165). Instead, we may simply note that Bourdieu is able to provide a compendium of data establishing both that an isomorphism obtains between the structure of social space and the distribution of consumption practices, and that this correspondence is mediated by a subjective system of dispositions whose “expression” across multiple domains of consumption confers a semantic unity on the practices that warrants reference to coherent “lifestyles.” Thus, in keeping with the claims of his early remarks concerning Weber, he is able to establish a necessary relation between class and status. Nevertheless, as elaborated here, the analysis remains incomplete. Above all, this is because the presentation has been essentially static, freezing the practices being studied into a kind of snapshot. Hence,

one must move beyond this provisional objectivism, which, in “treating social facts as things,” reifies what it describes. The social positions which present themselves to the observer as places juxtaposed in a static order of discrete compartments...are also strategic emplacements, fortresses to be defended and captured in a field of struggles. (Bourdieu 1984, p. 244)

Differences of lifestyle are, for Bourdieu, profoundly implicated in conflicts over individuals’ location in social space and the structure of that space itself. This implies that conflicts between classes and between class fractions have an ineluctably symbolic component. It is in this proposition that the full significance of Bourdieu’s attempt to yoke together “class” and “status” becomes apparent.

Classificatory Conflicts and Symbolic Violence

Following “capital” and “habitus,” the third general concept of Bourdieu’s sociology that must be introduced is that of field, a notion intended to condense his understanding of social structure. As we have already seen, Bourdieu views the class structure of a social formation as an objective network of positions which are systematically related to one another in terms of the distribution of cultural and economic capital across occupational locations. The concept of field is intended to foreclose an overly structuralist interpretation of social space—that is, one in which the individuals who “occupy” the various positions are reduced to the role of mere “bearers” of the structural relations that are encapsulated in them (see Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, pp. 94-115). In this context, the term is meant to recall a battlefield or a playing field, and more specifically, the fact that the individuals who confront one another will enter into conflict or competition with one another, each from a more or less advantageous position (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, pp. 16-18). On this basis, Bourdieu’s social space can equally be termed a “field of social classes” (e.g. Bourdieu 1984, p. 345; 1991, p. 41). In the context of Distinction, this means that lifestyles are caught up in social struggles.

Aspects of a lifestyle such as haute cuisine or an antique collection, on the one hand, are not simply distinct from “hearty” foods and mass produced decorations, on the other. To the contrary, the different forms of the same lifestyle element (furniture, food, etc.) stand in a hierarchical relation to one another, and as a result of this, lifestyles themselves are socially ranked. According to Bourdieu, the hierarchical “status” of a lifestyle is a function of its proximity to or distance from the “legitimate culture.” The latter refers to those elements of culture universally recognized as “worthy,” “canonical,” or in some other way “distinguished.” As such, the composition of the legitimate culture is permanently in play: it is the object of a perpetual struggle. Thus, for example, when apprehended in relation to the underlying habitus that generated them, the characteristic minutiae of the bourgeois style of eating and the working class style of eating amount to nothing less than

“two antagonistic world views,...two representations of human excellence” (Bourdieu 1984, p. 199).

Bourdieu identifies at least two modalities according to which conflicts over the “legitimate culture” proceed. The first follows the well-established sociological model of the “trickle-down effect.” According to his interpretation of this model, a perpetual competition exists over the appropriation of the most “distinguished” objects or practices. Initially seized upon by those with the greatest economic and/or cultural capital—that is, by the dominant class or one of its fractions—such objects or practices diffuse downward through social space over time; however, precisely to the extent they become progressively “popularized,” each earlier group of devotees tends to abandon them in favor new objects and practices that will enable them to re-assert the exclusivity of their taste. In this form of competition, which is quasi-imitative, the dominant class or one of its fractions invariably takes the leading role and acts as “taste-maker” (Bourdieu 1984, pp. 247-256). According to Bourdieu, the working class, generally incapable of asserting itself in such competitions as a result of both its lack of capital and its antithetical disposition, tends to stand aloof from them, and thus involuntarily acts as a negative reference point or “foil” against which the petty bourgeoisie and the dominant class can attempt to affirm their cultural distinction. Indeed, in Bourdieu’s view, the working class’ incapacity to participate in the race to claim those forms of culture whose legitimacy its members nonetheless acknowledge (at least implicitly) is so severe that they may be said to be “imbued with a sense of their cultural unworthiness” (Bourdieu 1984, p. 251).¹⁸

¹⁸ Bourdieu would have perhaps had to modify his undeniably harsh depiction of working class cultural dispossession and passivity had he been able to identify the distinct fractions within this class that his theory postulates, since he would then have been compelled to analyze its internecine conflicts. Nevertheless, however one judges this aspect of *Distinction*, it must be remembered that the premise of a hierarchy lifestyles cannot be falsified simply by pointing to the canonization of “popular” (or once “popular”) forms of culture. Bourdieu is fully aware of such phenomena, but argues that the consecration of working class cultural forms inevitably occurs by way of intellectuals or artists; endowed

Conflicts over the legitimate culture more or less inevitably take a “trickle-down” form when the particular form of culture at issue is one for which the “consecration” that confers legitimacy is reserved to an institutionally sanctioned, highly closed group of “experts” or “professionals” (Bourdieu 1990a, p. 138).¹⁹ Art, with its highly circumscribed institutional spaces (University departments, museums, galleries, auction houses, etc.), communicative venues (journals, lectures, etc.), and interpersonal networks (artists’ or journalists’ cliques) represents a paradigmatic case. Although quite uncommon in Bourdieu’s account of the working class’ relation to culture, in the less rigidly circumscribed domains of culture he appears to detect glimmers of an alternative cultural conflict. In these cases, legitimacy itself is contested:

[t]he art of eating and drinking remains one of the few areas in which the working classes explicitly challenge the legitimate art of living. In the face of the new ethic of sobriety..., which is most recognized at the highest levels of the hierarchy, peasants and especially industrial workers maintain an ethic of convivial indulgence. A *bon vivant* is not just someone who enjoys eating and drinking; he is someone capable of entering in the generous and the familiar—that is, both simple and free—relationship that is encouraged and symbolized by eating and drinking together.... (Bourdieu 1984, p. 179)

with different habitus, these cultural forms carry an entirely different meaning for them (see Bourdieu 1984, pp. 47-48, 88, 372-374).

¹⁹ The “consecration” of cultural objects and practices that is generated in these (relatively) closed and autonomous worlds is not unanimous; to the contrary, for Bourdieu it is the subject to sharp internal conflicts. This leads to a complex sets of relations between the various actors within such worlds and the various “publics” constituted by the different classes and fractions (although the working class remains almost completely outside such dynamics). Bourdieu’s guiding hypothesis is that the divisions within these worlds are homologous to those characterizing the potential publics—that is, they are roughly isomorphic with social space. See Bourdieu (1984, pp. 230-244).

[T]he only area of working-class practice in which style in itself achieves stylization is that of language, with argot,...which implicitly affirms a counter-legitimacy with, for example, the intention of deriding and desacralizing the “values” of the dominant morality and aesthetic. (Bourdieu 1984, p. 395, see also p. 34; 1991, pp. 90-102)

If contestation of cultural hierarchies on the part of the working class remains exceedingly rare, it is more frequent in the conflicts over the legitimate style of life that are waged within the petty bourgeoisie and the dominant class by their respective fractions. In the latter case, in particular, conflicts over the content and meaning of the legitimate culture are the norm, with each fraction seeking to elicit recognition from the others of the superiority of its own way of living and way of being.²⁰

²⁰ Bourdieu is routinely chastised for emphasizing the absolute primacy of a belle lettriste or “highbrow” form of culture which is now obsolete in France and which was never applicable to the United States and to various other countries. In fact, however, as Lane (2000, pp. 148-157) cogently reminds us, the analysis of the dominant class in Distinction clearly charts the eclipse (albeit in its early stages) of the paragon status attributed to “classical highbrow” culture, in favor not of the literary culture of the intellectuals, but the modernist one of the executives and managers.

It may be noted that studies of cultural consumption carried out in the U.S. over the last few decades indicate the emergence of a new type of cultural hierarchy—what Peterson and Kern (1996) designate the ideal of the “cultural omnivore.” Under this ideal, rather than standing in a hierarchical relation, the different forms of each cultural practice or object—for example, the various cuisines, musical traditions, or literary genres—are understood to all have their own meritorious exemplars, as determined by evaluative criteria which are indigenous to their particular “cultural milieux,” and therefore mutually irreducible. The resulting social imperative amounts to a kind of cultural “cosmopolitanism,” hinging on facility with the immanent meaning and unique virtues of a wide range of objects and practices. What needs to be pointed out with regard to this cosmopolitanism is that it is perfectly capable of functioning as a status vehicle, and it strongly presupposes an asymmetrically distributed

The practices and objects constitutive of a lifestyle, Bourdieu insists, do not merely “express” the schemes which comprise the habitus. To appreciate a certain type of music is, implicitly or explicitly, to spurn other available forms of music; to find some types of cuisine particularly appetizing is to find others unappealing; and to find certain schools of painting inspiring is to find others dull. In each of these cases, the rejected practices or objects carry an association with the social actors who engage in or possess them. For Bourdieu, in other words, the aesthetic sensibility that orients actors’ everyday choices in matters of food, clothing, sports, art, and music—and which extends to things as seemingly trivial as their bodily posture—serves as a vehicle through which they symbolize their social similarity with and their social difference from one another. Through the minutiae of everyday consumption, in other words, each individual continuously classifies him- or herself and, simultaneously, all others as alike or different. Acknowledgement of this symbolic function of everyday consumption behavior opens the way to the analysis of “classification struggles,” in which Bourdieu (1984, p. 483) sees “a forgotten dimension of the class struggle.”

As was established, Bourdieu conceptualizes social space as a factorial space. Thus, to make a rather obvious point, a space constituted by continuous axes is one that is devoid of inherent boundaries. Consequently, it is only through these constant, reciprocal acts of social classification that social collectivities are born: bounded social groups are the result of practices that seek to symbolically delimit “regions” of social space (Bourdieu 1984, pp. 174-175, 476; see also 1991, p. 120; 1990a, p. 140). As such, they arise from the perception of social space through quasi-categorical symbolizations of affinity and incompatibility (which Bourdieu sometimes refers to as “categoremes” [1984, p. 475], in order to indicate that they tend to function at a pre-reflexive level). Indeed, for Bourdieu, the symbolic is a “separative power, . . . diacrisis, discretio, drawing discrete units out of indivisible continuities, difference

competence—both of which are demonstrated by Bryson (1996), who thus goes on to coin the term “multicultural capital.”

out of the undifferentiated" (Bourdieu 1984, p. 479). This implies that any social collectivity is the result of the combined symbolic acts of self-classification and classification by others that are applied to its members (and, therefore, also, to those who are excluded). However, the various actors do not contribute equally to this process of mutual categorization and classification. To the contrary, the capacity to establish the divisions which structure the perception of social space is not evenly dispersed across this space, since much of the symbolic force accruing to objects or practices that fulfill a classificatory function derives from their relative proximity to or distance from the legitimate culture (see Bourdieu 1991, p. 242; 1990a, p. 139; 1987, p. 11; 1990b, p. 135).

For Bourdieu, the practices through which these processes of mutual classification unfold are guided by principles of taste that are lodged in the habitus, and thus situated below the threshold of reflexive consciousness. Nevertheless, they conform to a strategic logic (as with the example of the tennis player who charges the net). As a result, sociologists are compelled to attend closely to the seemingly trivial "games" of culture and the routine choices of everyday life.

Every real inquiry into the divisions of the social world has to analyze the interests associated with membership or non-membership. As is shown by the attention devoted to the strategic, "frontier" groups such as the "labor aristocracy," which hesitates between class compromise and class collaboration,...the laying down of boundaries between the classes is inspired by the strategic aim of "counting in" or "being counted in," "cataloguing" or "annexing".... (Bourdieu 1984, pp. 476)

The full importance of the classificatory struggles that are waged through the medium of lifestyle becomes clear as soon as we recognize that before there can be any kind of "class conflict" (in the familiar sense of the term), symbolic processes must first transpire in which the relevant collectivities are demarcated from one another—that is, in which each

identifies itself and its opponent(s)—along with the interests that can form the object of conflict (Bourdieu 1990b, p. 138).²¹

Nevertheless, given that the actors who are the objects of classificatory practices occupy particular positions in social space, and that the degree of similarity or difference between their habitus is a function of their location in this space, it follows that not all classificatory schemes have an equal likelihood of attaining social recognition. In other words, irrespective of the symbolic force that accrues to the particular agent who puts forth a classificatory scheme, the structure of social space—as the thoroughly real referent of such schemes—necessarily conditions their plausibility (Bourdieu 1990b, p. 138).²² Thus, for example, attempts to symbolically establish a belief in

²¹ In the Marxian tradition, the position which most closely approximates that of Bourdieu was developed by rather “heterodox” argument of Przeworski (1985). See Weininger (2002, pp. 91-93) for a discussion of the differences between the two.

²² The literature on cultural cosmopolitanism (note 20, above) is enough to cast doubt on those versions of “postmodernism” that assert the complete extirpation of culture from any social-structural mooring. For these theories, the efficacy of symbolic systems, understood as the medium through which the “social construction of reality” occurs, is no longer a function of their correspondence or non-correspondence to the real (or indeed to any “real,” other than themselves). The “liberatory” variants typically make the further assumption that symbolic systems are more malleable and plastic than (now enervated) social systems, implying, among other things, that identity is the result of a reflexive self-fashioning that is altogether unconstrained by “birth or fortune.” Here again, Lane (2000, pp. 157-159) provides a useful reminder, pointing out that numerous aspects of this “postmodern” worldview were already encapsulated in certain sections of Distinction. Making sly reference to some of the French philosophers of the day, Bourdieu traced the contours of a lifestyle which postulated self-realization through consumption and a “refusal to be pinned down in a particular site in social space.” This pretension to unclassifiability—“a sort of dream of social flying, a desperate effort to defy the gravity of the social field”—was characteristic of the “new cultural intermediaries,” that is, the fraction of the petite bourgeoisie employed in producing commercial symbolic products, and especially those members of the

the categorical unity of the “cultural” fraction of the petty bourgeoisie, on the one hand, and the “economic” fraction of the dominant class, on the other, suffer from inherent implausibility, since the actors in question, separated by wide intervening swaths of social space, possess highly divergent habitus. Simply put, the probability of any two actors’ membership in the same social category is inversely proportional to the distance that separates them in social space (Bourdieu 1991, p. 232). This said, however, it also remains true that the social space itself is free of any intrinsic boundaries. And given this continuous structure, it becomes clear that (contrary to the frequent charges of hyper-determinism leveled against Bourdieu) the introduction of symbolic “partitions” or boundaries into this space, and the consequent formation of social collectivities, amounts to a causally irreducible aspect of actors’ practices. This has important consequences. Most significantly, it implies that the contours of the “social classes” which emerge through these practices are in no way pre-established: the “partitioning” of social space may occur in a highly aggregative or highly disaggregative manner along each of its constitutive axes, yielding an infinite number of possible configurations (Bourdieu 1987, p. 10). Hence, in certain situations it may be that “objective differences...reproduce themselves in the subjective experience of difference” (Bourdieu 1987, p. 5); in others, however, it may well be that “social neighborhood...has every chance of...being the point of greatest tension” (Bourdieu 1990a, p. 137).

Arising from practices that are thematically oriented to altogether different ends (that is, to food, art, fashion, etc.), the boundaries that are established through lifestyles can have no precision. To the contrary, these boundaries are necessarily indeterminate and fuzzy (Bourdieu 1991, p. 234). For the same reason, they have no permanence, existing only in the flux of ongoing practices (Bourdieu 1990a, p. 141). Hence, they are undeniably porous. Nevertheless, as “symbolic transformations of de facto differences” (Bourdieu 1991, p. 238), they are crucial to the maintenance or transformation of the underlying class

fraction who, originating in the dominant class, had experienced an unforeseen downward mobility (Bourdieu 1984, p. 370, see pp. 152-154, 365-371).

structure. We must recall that the “practical taxonomies” which agents establish via the symbolic effects of their practices are not merely empty “grids” superimposed on the social space. The various practices, and through them the different lifestyles, all stand in a hierarchical relation to the legitimate culture—that is, (schematically) to the canonized culture. As a consequence, social classification is simultaneously a social allocation of honor, in Weber’s sense. And it is Bourdieu’s fundamental thesis that, precisely because individuals perceive one another primarily through the “status” which attaches to their practices—or in other words, through the symbolic veil of honor—that they misperceive the real basis of these practices: the economic and cultural capital that both underlies the different habitus and enables their realization. When differences of economic and cultural capital are misperceived as differences of honor, they function as what Bourdieu calls symbolic capital (see Bourdieu 1991, p. 238). This function can be understood as a “legitimizing theatricalization which always accompanies the exercise of power,” and which “extends to all practices and in particular consumption.” Consequently, according to Bourdieu, “[t]he very lifestyle of the holders of power contributes to the power that makes it possible, because its true conditions of possibility remain unrecognized...” (1990a, p. 139). Insofar as this is the case, the misperception of social space—which characterizes both the dominant and the dominated, albeit to the advantage of the latter—is also “symbolic violence.”

From the Practical State to the Objective State: Modalities of Symbolic Power

For Bourdieu, the indeterminate, porous boundaries that arise from the free play of (implicitly) antagonistic consumption practices amount to what might be called powers of “primitive classification” (see Durkheim and Mauss 1963; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, p. 12-15). These powers are only a particular modality—albeit a fundamental one—in which the institution of boundaries may occur. Indeed, whenever classification is no longer left exclusively to the pre-reflexive “play” of the habitus, social boundaries—and therefore the collectivities that they constitute—are subject to codification. According to Bourdieu, “[t]o codify means to banish the effect of vagueness and indeterminacy,

boundaries which are badly drawn and divisions which are only approximate, by producing clear classes and making clear cuts, establishing firm frontiers..." (1990b, p. 82). This implies formalization: the criteria according to which cases are differentiated may be specified, and the resulting categories scrutinized according to logical considerations (for example, does membership in one preclude the possibility of membership in another, as with debates about the existence of "cross-class families"?). In contrast to the situational elasticity of social categorizations generated exclusively through consumption practices, boundaries which undergo codification enjoy a definite precision, and in some cases, a permanence and a force. Codification thus amounts to an "objectification" or "crystallization" of divisions that could otherwise only be generated spontaneously. Thus, by beginning from a dispositional level, Bourdieu's analysis of the formation of collectivities opens up a diverse set of phenomena for analysis, those concerning the processes through which differences existing in the "practical state" become transformed into objectified "frontiers." Moreover, because codification implies a transformation in the way boundaries operate, it also implies a transformation of the symbolic power that stands behind them. Indeed,

[t]he capacity for bringing into existence in an explicit state,...of making public (i.e. objectified, visible, sayable, and even official) that which, not yet having attained objective and collective existence, remained in a state of individual or serial existence...represents a formidable social power, that of bringing into existence groups by establishing...the explicit consensus of the whole group. (Bourdieu 1991, p. 236)

It is in the course of an analysis of the different modalities of symbolic power that the politics of classification fully emerge.

We may note, first of all, that an elementary codification occurs as soon as any collectivity—and thus, tacitly or explicitly, the boundary that separates it from other(s)—accedes to the level of discourse. As Bourdieu likes to point out, "any predicative statement with 'the working class' as its subject conceals an existential statement (there is a working

class)" (1991, p. 250). The linguistic designation of the collective, the name (or social label), makes it possible for its boundaries to become an object of thematic concern, since it implies, at least potentially, a finite set of individuals whose limits can be traced, and a principle of inclusion which can be applied to particular cases (see Bourdieu 1984, p. 480). The implicit feelings of affinity or incompatibility engendered by similarities or differences of lifestyle—a relatively “serial” state of existence—can now be articulated; verbal designation of the collective enables an explicit recognition of the membership status of oneself and others (“He’s not middle class; his Mom’s a lawyer!”), and thereby confers an explicitly collective dimension on individuals’ sense of personal identity. Furthermore, it is only with a discursive identity that is known and recognized by the members of the class (or fraction) that they become capable of acting in concert for a specified purpose—that is, of mobilizing. Hence, “social classes,” as they are typically envisioned in social theory—namely, as groups entering into conflict for the sake of “class interests”—are profoundly discursive entities; and insofar as the preservation or transformation of the underlying distributions of economic and cultural capital in fact hinges on collective action, discourse contributes to the shaping and re-shaping of social space itself. The linguistic designation of collectivities, in other words, must be credited with a power of “social construction,” since it can bring into being a collective entity with an explicitly acknowledged existence and a capacity for collective action. Nevertheless, it is by no means wholly independent of lifestyle differences: part of the effectiveness of the linguistic designation of collectivities derives from its capacity to render overt social cleavages that were already given to pre-verbal experience, and thus, “familiar.” Moreover, like these cleavages, discourse is constrained by the structure of social space, which forms its ultimate substrate (Bourdieu 1990b, p. 138).

As with the establishment of differences through lifestyle practices, discursive categorization of individuals can meet with resistance, since each individual is simultaneously classifier and classified. Furthermore, in this register too, individuals are unequally endowed with the capacity to impose their classifications. This inequality has particularly significant consequences in the realm of

politics (for reasons that will be clarified shortly). Indeed, for Bourdieu, the working class' lack of cultural capital is so severe that its members are, to a certain extent, incapable of offering—and frequently do not consider themselves entitled to offer—“deliberative” judgments for circulation in the public sphere (see Bourdieu 1984, pp. 397-465). Consequently, authority to speak for the class—to articulate its history, political opinions, needs, and demands—must be delegated to a group of professional spokespersons, who are themselves supported by an organization (the party or the union) dedicated to the work of representing the collective. The class thus attains a particular (“metonymic”) form of “objectified” existence in which the maintenance of its boundaries and the mobilization of its members is continuously managed by a corps of “specialists”: “[t]he ‘working class’ exists in and through the body of representatives who give it an audible voice and a visible presence, and in and through the belief in its existence which this body of plenipotentiaries succeeds in imposing...” (Bourdieu 1991, p. 251, see also pp. 173-174).

Well beyond the elementary codification that discourse brings about, social institutions may possess the power to instate and regulate class- or fraction-constitutive boundaries characterized by a high degree of solidity and permanence, and may do so in independence from the classificatory schemes of the actors who are subject to categorization by them. Educational institutions, with the power to issue credentials, are Bourdieu's preferred example. Insofar as they carry a more or less universally recognized value in the labor market, credentials institute an objective frontier between holders and non-holder. At the same time, however, credentialization also exerts a symbolic effect, since it entails the introduction of a qualitative discontinuity into the continuum of cultural competences: the difference between the person with highest failing score on an examination and the person with the lowest passing score, Bourdieu (1990a, pp. 137-138) points out, becomes a difference in kind. Social categories such as “skilled manual workers,” for example, are largely circumscribed by the educational system's exclusive authority to confer credentials and to differentiate between types of credential (“technical certificates” versus “degrees”).

The frontiers demarcating collectivities from one another attain their highest level of objectification when they are inscribed into law (Bourdieu 1987, p. 13). Here we encounter a fully codified symbolic system: law is interpreted, applied, and typically produced by a body of specially trained experts, and these processes are restricted to an institutional arena in which issues of coherence and consistency are paramount. It thus attains the fully formalized status of a code (Bourdieu 1990b, pp. 79-80), and exhibits a maximum of precision. Furthermore, legal boundaries are enforceable, with transgressions subject to sanction by an “official” agency—that is, a branch of the state.

The state itself stands at the apex of the progression we have been tracing. Appropriating Weber's formula, Bourdieu defines the state in terms of “the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical and symbolic violence over a definite territory” (Bourdieu 1998b, p. 40). This means, above all, that the state, and it alone, retains the legitimate right to impose classificatory principles which enjoy a compulsory validity, or (as in the case of schools and the credentials they issue) to at least adjudicate the validity of all such principles (see Bourdieu 1990b, pp. 136-137). In addition to its power to craft and enforce law, the state also engages in various forms of social categorization via agencies dedicated to the enumeration of its population and the regulation of various activities (for example, in the economic sphere, with the development of occupational taxonomies or the regulation of working conditions). This power has discrepant consequences for the classificatory struggles that transpire at lower levels of codification (for example, through mobilizing discourses). On the one hand, the state can inscribe a set of categorizations into the social order that, as a result of their obligatory character, restrict the room for maneuver open to social actors. On the other hand, however, the state's authority can itself become an object in such struggles, via the mobilized collective's petition of agencies and bureaus: “[a] group's presence or absence in the official classification depends on its capacity to get itself recognized, to get itself noticed and admitted, and so to win a place in the social order” (Bourdieu 1984, pp. 480-481). Recognition by the state provides “an official definition of one's social identity,” and thus “saves its bearers from the symbolic struggle of all against all” (Bourdieu 1991, p. 240).

Beyond this, however, we must again recall that the collectivities which are born through (or whose existence is ratified by) the classificatory actions of the state cannot be viewed in terms of an empty “grid” superimposed on the social space. Rather, in establishing boundaries, the state also allocates “advantages and obligations” (Bourdieu 1984, pp. 476-477; see also 1991, pp. 180-181). Thus, for example, within the context of production, a successful petition of the state can result in the credential requirements, licensing exams, and other formal entry criteria that comprise the occupational barriers resulting in closure and generating “rents.”²³ (However, it must be reiterated that, for Bourdieu, production—as opposed to consumption—is of secondary importance as

²³ In order to maintain their “realist” conception of the occupational order, Grusky and Sørensen (1998, p. 1195) are compelled to characterize the occupational classifications constructed by the state as mere “nominalist” exercises which can claim a grounding in reality only insofar as incumbents in the various occupations have already mobilized themselves and successfully petitioned the state to erect entry barriers. In doing so, Grusky and Sørensen fail to recognize that the substantial autonomy which state agencies usually enjoy (*vis-à-vis* those being classified) means that the construction of their classificatory systems are just as likely to be driven by the interests of the state bureaucrats themselves, as various historical studies have demonstrated (see Donnelly 1997, and the citations therein). Moreover, acknowledgement of this by no means entails a slide into epistemological nominalism, as they appear to assume. Precisely to the extent that bureaucratic imposition of a classificatory designation is able to elicit recognition, both from the incumbents and from those excluded, it is characterized by “that magical reality which (with Durkheim and Mauss) defines institutions as social fictions” (Bourdieu 1991, p. 251). The relevant question, as Donnelly (1997, p. 115) puts it, is “[w]hat consequences might official classifications have for the consciousness and action of social subjects?” In sum, it is necessary to recognize that, above and beyond ratifying “jurisdictional settlements,” the state makes an independent contribution to the structuring of the occupational order—and that acknowledgement of its role need not jeopardize epistemological “realism.”

a site in which the formation of solidaristic ties and collective mobilization are likely to occur in the contemporary period.²⁴)

Our discussion has proceeded, in a sequential manner, from the diffuse, fluctuating boundaries that are generated through the play of consumption practices to the rigid, obligatory ones authorized by the state. However, neither social actors nor the sociologists who study them ever encounter a world that is symbolically undifferentiated. This is to say that the discussion has relied on an abstraction, one in which all objectified symbolic barriers were initially bracketed, so as to trace the progressive constitution of classifications from the uncodified state (lifestyles) through processes of discursive identification, collective mobilization, and finally, “officialization” by the state (see Bourdieu 1990a, pp. 122-134). What emerges from an account developed in this manner is a point of fundamental importance to Bourdieu: all social collectivities are “historical artifacts” (Bourdieu 1987, pp. 8-9), and to fully grasp them, sociology has no choice but to “reconstruct the historical labor which has produced [the] social divisions” through which they were constituted (Bourdieu 1991, p. 248).

This being said, however, once we remove the brackets that were initially placed around objectified symbolic structures in order to trace their genesis, it becomes clear that the social world, as it is actually encountered, is “always already” riven by innumerable symbolic cleavages, ranging from the diffuse to the fully codified. Consequently, the actors who engage in mutual classification—whether through consumption practices, discourse, or any other symbolic medium—have spent their lives immersed in an already classified world. Thus, their experience of the social world has always been an experience of distinctions. And as a result of immersion (especially during primary socialization) in a world that was previously divided, the existing structures of social classification were necessarily impressed upon their

²⁴ For a historical study which, drawing closely on Bourdieu's conceptual repertoire, charts the emergence of a new occupational category via mobilization at the point of production and petition of the state, see Boltanski's (1987) study of the formation of the cadres, as well as Wacquant's (1991) discussion of it.

habitus. In other words, the habitus also incorporates “principles of vision and division” (Bourdieu 1998b, p. 46)—meaning a general tendency to classify the things and people of the world in a determinate manner—that have been absorbed from the social environment in which it was formed: “[s]ocial divisions become principles of division, organizing the image of the social world” (Bourdieu 1984, p. 471). This lends the habitus a certain tendency towards inertia—that is, towards the reproduction in its own practice of classificatory structures encountered in early experience (see Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, p. 133). This propensity is all the more prevalent the more the boundaries between classes (and fractions) are written into law, and therefore have an official status (Bourdieu 1990a, pp. 138-139). Nevertheless, classificatory structures are unlikely to be perpetuated, *ad infinitum*, without modification or alteration. This is because, in the first place, events such as economic transformations may alter the distribution of capitals. In the second place, however, the fact that social space is so highly differentiated ensures the existence of multiple systems of classification, competing with one another in perpetuity; and it is precisely such competition which generates symbolic invention. In Bourdieu's estimation, “[i]t is in the intermediate positions of social space, especially in the United States, that the indeterminacy and objective uncertainty of relations between practices and positions is at a maximum, and also, consequently, the intensity of symbolic strategies” (1990b, p. 133).

III. Domination Multiplied

As we have seen, Bourdieu's understanding of class has a number of features that set it apart from other treatments of the subject. These include its conceptualization of the class structure as a multidimensional social space; its emphasis on consumption, viewed as an arena of social life in which the possession of economic and cultural capital can be “theatrically” displayed; and its relentless focus on the symbolic dimension of practices, identified as the indispensable bridge between structural proximity, on the one hand, and co-membership in a social class (or fraction), on the other. At the same time, however, in developing this account of Bourdieu's class theory and class analysis, we

have necessarily simplified, insofar as the social world it delineates is one in which all other forms of domination were left to the side. In what follows, we will therefore introduce elements such as ethnicity and, in particular, gender to the account. Because Bourdieu's thinking developed on these questions in the years following Distinction, we will first detail the assumptions that animate that work; subsequently, we will elaborate the revisions that can be found in later writings, and especially Masculine Domination (2001b), examining their implications for the for the earlier understanding of class.

Complex Causes

Distinction is by no means concerned only with the impact of differences of economic and cultural capital on practices. To the contrary, various other “stratifying” factors—including gender, age, region, and (to a lesser extent) ethnicity—receive frequent discussion. However, whereas sociology conventionally considers these factors as distinct bases of domination or stratification—bases which, given a particular outcome, might (or might not) be effective in addition to class—Bourdieu takes a radically different approach. In order to clarify this approach, we must reconsider the causal link connecting occupancy of a particular position in social space to the formation of the habitus, and through it, to particular practices. Bourdieu's stance becomes apparent in a description of the manner in which the different aspects of one's location in social space (that is, volume of capital, composition of capital, and trajectory) are related to a variety of demographic characteristics (gender, age, ethnicity, etc.), and the manner in which, together, these different elements affect the habitus:

[t]o account for the infinite diversity of practices in a way that is both unitary and specific, one has to break with linear thinking, which only recognizes simply ordered structures of direct determination, and endeavor to reconstruct the networks of intertwined [enchevêtrées] relationships which are present in each of the factors. The structural causality of a network of factors is quite irreducible to the cumulated effects of...[a] set of linear relations...; through each of the factors is exerted the

efficacy of all of the others.... (Bourdieu 1984, p. 107; translation modified)

The “structural causality” Bourdieu refers to can be understood in terms of a system of causally interactive factors (Weininger 2002, pp. 68-71). As noted, this system includes effects deriving both from one’s location in social space and from the demographic characteristics. In asserting that causal relations are wholly interactive, Bourdieu implies that the impact of each of these factors on the formation of the habitus (and through it, on particular practices) varies according an individual’s “value” on each of the other factors. This amounts to a rejection of what Abbott (2001) refers to as the “main effects assumption” in causal logic—that is, the presupposition that causal factors operate independently of one another, unless the converse can demonstrated empirically.²⁵

However, Bourdieu also places an important substantive restriction on the manner in which the system of interactive factors is to be conceptualized. This restriction concerns the interpretation of the interactive relations. It is apparent in the terminology he chooses: the factors deriving from location in social space are identified as “primary,” while the demographic characteristics are designated “secondary” factors (see Bourdieu 1984, pp. 101ff.). This indicates that, for Bourdieu, interactive relations are to be understood in terms of alterations that are induced in the effects attributable to demographic characteristics as location in social space changes. More concretely, it means that, on Bourdieu’s interpretation, the impact of a factor such as gender on the habitus varies according to location in social space, and not vice-versa. Bourdieu’s stance is apparent in remarks such as the following:

the whole set of socially constituted differences between the sexes tends to weaken as one moves up the social hierarchy and

²⁵ This aspect of Bourdieu’s sociology has generally gone unnoticed in the English-language reception of his work. It has been recognized, however, in the French literature (e.g. Accardo 1997, pp. 191-211).

especially towards the...[“intellectual” pole] of the dominant class, where women tend to share the most typically male prerogatives such as the reading of “serious” newspapers and interest in politics, while the men do not hesitate to express interests and dispositions, in matters of taste, for example, which elsewhere would be regarded as “effeminate.” (Bourdieu 1984, pp. 382-383; my addition)

The habitus is always “gendered”; however, the consequences of this (with respect to the practices that it produces) vary according to position in social space. Thus, volume of capital, composition of capital, and trajectory enjoy a certain primacy: the meaning ascribed to the “secondary” factors is a function of location in social space; the impact of location, by contrast, does not vary systematically as a function of the “secondary” factors. It is precisely this primacy which Bourdieu announces when he declares that “volume and composition of capital give specific form and value to the determination which the other factors (age, sex, place of residence, etc.) impose on practices” (Bourdieu 1984, p. 107).

The corollary of this rather opaque account of causality is significant. In asserting the primacy of the factors related to location in social space in the formation of the habitus, Bourdieu is ascribing—on purely meta-theoretical grounds—a greater importance to them in the explanation of practices. Furthermore, he is also declaring them to be the primary lines along which social conflicts will erupt: “groups mobilized on the basis of a secondary criterion (such as sex or age) are likely to be bound together less permanently and less deeply than those mobilized on the basis the fundamental determinants of their condition” (Bourdieu 1984, p. 107)—that is, on the basis of volume, composition, and trajectory. In other words, in the “symbolic struggle of all against all,” schemata based on gender, age, or ethnic categorizations have inherently less capacity to elicit recognition than those schemata which (like social class) remain consistent with the structural contours of social space.

Crosscutting Classifications

In later work, Bourdieu jettisoned the assumption that the “life conditions” associated with a location in social space are the fundamental determinants of the habitus, eclipsing the role of “secondary” factors such as gender. This amounted to a revocation of the causal primacy attributed to volume of capital, composition of capital, and trajectory. In its place, we find the sketch of a sociology which is considerably more attuned to the historical specificities of the different bases of social domination. This is most apparent in his writings on gender.

A short book that charts a very wide terrain, Bourdieu's Masculine Domination aims to provide “an archeological history of the unconsciousness which, having no doubt been constructed in a very ancient and very archaic state of our societies, inhabits each of us, whether man or woman” (Bourdieu 2001b, p. 54). The analytic strategy Bourdieu pursues is unusual: returning to data from earlier anthropological studies of the pre-modern people of Kabylia (located in northeastern Algeria), he attempts to explicate the “andocentric cosmology” which impresses itself upon habitus, and through them, comes to organize all institutions and practices. Proceeding on the supposition that gender domination is relatively transparent in this universe, he subsequently attempts to identify the “transhistorically constant” features with which it appears throughout the Mediterranean region by means of a comparison with contemporary societies.

In contrast to Distinction, Bourdieu's later work takes gender domination to be “the paradigmatic form of symbolic violence” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, p. 170). Like all forms of collective identity, gender is the result of a social classification—in this case, one resting on the “mystic boundaries” that categorize male and female bodies (Bourdieu 2001b, p. 2; the phrase is taken from Virginia Woolf). This classificatory principle originated, Bourdieu argues, in kinship systems in which marriage served as the mechanism through which alliances could be formed and prestige allocated between families. Women, in this system, functioned as objects of exchange rather than subjects, and hence their worth rested on their ability to conform to the “androcentric” ideal of femininity (Bourdieu 2001b, pp. 42-49; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, pp. 173-174). (Virility is identified as the corresponding ideal applied to men.) As a particular symbolic scheme

that is incorporated into the habitus, gender is highly distinct from class: built around a dualist opposition, it has attained a rigidity and a permanence unmatched by any other classificatory principle. This is largely because gender amounts to a symbolic system that has rooted itself in “certain indisputable natural properties,” and therefore “naturalized” itself more effectively than any other—that is, legitimated itself via the constitution of a seemingly natural ground (Bourdieu 2001b, pp. 13, 23). In the present context, it is impossible to fully analyze this work and its place in Bourdieu's corpus; instead, I would merely like to indicate some of the (generally implicit) revisions of his account of the relation between class and gender.

To be sure, Masculine Domination does contain remarks, reminiscent of the causal argument from Distinction, in which the gendered character of social actions is contingent on class location: “bodily properties are apprehended through schemes of perception whose use in acts of evaluation depends on the position occupied in social space” (Bourdieu 2001b, p. 64). Nevertheless, these remarks are complemented by others in which the relation between class and gender shifts. Thus, for example, in describing the analytic transition from the study of a pre-modern society to a modern one, we find Bourdieu declaring:

[i]t is indeed astonishing to observe the extraordinary autonomy of sexual structures relative to economic structures, of modes of reproduction relative to modes of production. The same system of classificatory schemes is found, in its essential features, through the centuries and across economic and social differences.... (Bourdieu 2001b, p.81; see also Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, p. 174)

In recognizing the dramatic continuity of gender structures across historical time, Bourdieu is compelled to attribute a pronounced autonomy to them vis-à-vis economic structures. In doing so, he breaks sharply from his earlier treatment of gender (that is, from its specification as a “secondary” factor). This leads Bourdieu to outline a research agenda centered on “the history of the agents and institutions

which...contribute to the maintenance” of the permanence of gender structures (Bourdieu 2001b, p. 83; italics removed). Among the institutions implicated in this process are the church, the state, and the educational system, as well as the family (Bourdieu 2001b, pp. 82-88). Of fundamental interest are the highly variable ways in which each of these institutions has codified the distinction between the sexes over the course of history.

Bourdieu argues that although recent and contemporary feminist political movements have thrown gender asymmetries in visible relief, “some of the mechanisms which underlie this domination continue to function” (Bourdieu 2001b, p. 56, see also pp. 88ff.). It is in his discussion of these mechanisms that we find the clearest revisions of the relation between class and gender:

whatever their position in social space, women have in common the fact that they are separated from men by a negative symbolic coefficient which, like skin color for blacks, or any other sign of membership in a stigmatized group, negatively affects everything that they are and do, and which is the source of a systematic set of homologous differences: despite the vast distance between them, there is something in common between a woman managing director...and the woman production line worker.... (Bourdieu 2001b, p. 93)

Statements such as this clearly indicate that, in keeping with the “autonomy” attributed to sexual structures across history, Bourdieu views gender divisions as an independent force structuring practices. At the same time, he also points to numerous “interactive” relations, but now seen as fully “symmetrical”—that is, gender and class location are each taken to moderate the effect that the other exercises on practices. Thus, in contrast to the causal logic at work in Distinction, we find remarks such as the following:

[s]ocial positions themselves are sexually characterized, and characterizing, and...in defending their jobs against feminization, men are trying to protect their most deep-rooted

idea of themselves as men, especially in the case of social categories such as manual workers or occupations such as those of army, which owe much, if not all of their value, even in their own eyes, to their image of manliness. (Bourdieu 2001b, p. 96)

The point here, of course, is not simply that Bourdieu's later work embraces a conception of causality that more closely resembles standard "multivariate" logic. What emerges from these revisions is a somewhat different view of "the existence...and mode of existence of collectives." Whereas Bourdieu always acknowledged that social class, as a symbolic principle of "vision and division," had to compete with other such principles (including gender) in the classificatory struggle through which collectivities are constituted (see, for example, Bourdieu 1987, p. 12), as we saw, he nevertheless granted it a meta-theoretical primacy in Distinction. Once that primacy is revoked, class must compete on an equal footing, and the symbolic arena becomes exponentially more cacophonous, as it were, especially given the rigid and durable codification attained by principles of division such as gender and race in certain societies. This is all the more true since the complex combinations of domination generated by the intersection of different classificatory principles can no longer be automatically interpreted in predominantly class terms.²⁶ One implication of this is that the fate of social classes, understood as collectivities constituted through practices of social classification, becomes more contingent than ever on the historical vicissitudes of the discourse of social class.

III. Conclusion

For Bourdieu, "the existence...and mode of existence of collectives" is "the question with which all sociology ought to begin." This question remained at the center of his sociological vision to the end of his career. Indeed, the revisions that can be identified in his later work

²⁶ Wacquant's (2002) account of the simultaneous constitution and maintenance of class and racial divisions in the U.S. by a historical series of four "peculiar institutions" can be read through the same explanatory lens.

are fully consistent with this general focus, and in fact, only serve to deepen it. Bourdieu always assumed that class relations are qualified by other forms of domination; and by revoking the privilege previously accorded to class in his later writings, he fully opened himself to the idea of a complicated “intertwining” of forms of domination through history. Consequently, whereas his class theory—with its multidimensional conception of social space—had always stood aloof from the traditional idea (most prominent in certain versions of Marxism) of a social world reduced to two polarized blocs, in texts such as *Masculine Domination* it becomes clear that social classes amount only to facets of a complex classificatory prism.²⁷ Thus, even if the priority granted to social class was revoked, Bourdieu's work remains thoroughly coherent in its relentless focus on the various forms of social classification, understood as the principia potestas—the fundamental power—animating acts of symbolic violence.

In order to develop the implications of Bourdieu's question of “the existence of and mode of existence of collectives” for class analysis, we might turn to Marx's well-known tract, “The Eighteenth Brumaire.” In Marx's account of the coup of 1851, the French peasantry is famously described as a “sack of potatoes.” Individual peasant families, each owning a small parcel of land, are largely self-sufficient; they have little sustained social contact with one another and lack access to effective “means of communication.” As a result, they are incapable of organizing themselves in order to mobilize and pursue their interests, instead remaining in what later commentators would term a “serial” state of existence. Marx thus acknowledges that before we can ask whether the peasantry (in this case) has “allied” itself with the bourgeoisie, the proletariat, or any other class, we must inquire whether it has the capacity to organize itself. True though this may be, Bourdieu reminds us that neither communication nor sustained social interaction between a

²⁷ The traditional Marxian notion of bifurcated social world, condensed to a single, antagonistic opposition between classes and unalloyed with other forms of social classification, remains one empirical possibility among others, albeit a highly implausible one.

set of individuals sharing the same life conditions are sufficient to generate a social collectivity, much less a mobilized one. Interests, no matter how putatively “objective” they may be, can never trigger collective social action on their own, and pace Marx, it is not merely technical impediments to organization that stand in the way. Indeed, without wanting to minimize the significance of technical constraints, it must be emphasized that between interests and collective actions there exists a chasm that can only be bridged by an immense amount of labor—a labor that is carried out, above all, in the symbolic register. The actors who organize and mobilize on behalf of “their” class must first recognize themselves as members of the same social collectivity, with the same interests and the same adversaries. This means that they must recognize themselves (and their counterparts in other classes) as sharing at least a minimal class identity.

In fact, the symbolic work that can be the precursor to mobilization is carried on continuously, by everyone. This makes it difficult to grasp sociologically. Indeed, it may be suggested that the only form of class analysis adequate to the task would be one which is able to fuse structural analysis with a phenomenological account of the innumerable acts of reciprocal classification that pervade social interaction. It is precisely this fusion, however, which traditional schools of class analysis have been unable to develop. This is most apparent in the case of Marxism. It is not difficult to identify a split in this tradition. On the one hand, for historians (e.g. Thompson 1966) and ethnographers (e.g. Fantasia 1989), “class” is something that must be made in a definite historical time and place. Such studies can excel at sifting through the minutiae of daily activities or through the historical record in order to identify the constitution of classes through processes of collocation and demarcation that result in more or less bounded social groups. At the same time, however, these processes tend to be localized affairs which cannot be systematically connected to a broad underlying class structure.²⁸ More concretely, such studies cannot examine the possibility

²⁸ Some forty years ago, Thompson prefaced his study of working class formation in late 18th and early 19th century England as follows:

that classificatory orientations vary systematically with structural location, or that the strategies through which these orientations are pursued vary with the resources at hand; and this limitation becomes all the more serious the more one acknowledges that the class structure itself is highly differentiated and multidimensional. On the other hand, however, analysts who grant conceptual priority to the class structure (e.g. Wright 1997) are able to slot individuals into highly detailed “maps” of this structure. Nevertheless, having classified social actors in this manner, they are ill-positioned to grasp processes of “classmaking.” Such studies are characteristically content to examine whether (or to what degree) individuals’ opinions and practices accord with those that would be predicted on the basis of their structural location; what gets lost from view is precisely what might be termed the constructivist dimension of social class. As Bourdieu suggests:

by assuming that actions and interactions could somehow be deduced from the structure, one dispenses with the question of the movement from the theoretical group to the practical group, that is to say, the question of the politics and of the political work required to impose a principle of vision and division of the social world, even when this principle is well-founded in reality. (Bourdieu 1987, p. 8; see also 1991, pp. 233-234)

[t]here is today an ever-present temptation to suppose that class is a thing. This was not Marx’s meaning, in his own historical writing, yet the error vitiates much latter-day “Marxist” writing. “It,” the working class, is assumed to have a real existence, which can be defined almost mathematically—so many men who stand in a certain relation to the means of production. Once this is assumed it becomes possible to deduce the class-consciousness which “it” ought to have (but seldom does have) if “it” was properly aware of its own position and real interests. (Thompson 1966, p. 10)

And he continued, “[c]lass is defined by men as they live their own history, and, in the end, this is its only definition” (Thompson 1966, p. 11).

(And it could be added that reliance on rational action theory, insofar as it reduces or eliminates the place of the symbolic in accounts of collective identity and collective action on meta-theoretical grounds, only exacerbates this myopia.) Bourdieu's entire approach to class, it might be suggested, is intended to methodically integrate the insights stemming from accounts which prioritize the structuralist and the constructivist dimensions, respectively, in a coherent program of empirical research (see 1984, p. 483).

The upshot of Bourdieu's approach is that the endless debate between proponents of nominalist and realist views of class is shown to be misguided. The opposition between these views must not be understood as an epistemological alternative that confronts the class analyst. To the contrary, nominalism and realism amount to what might be described as distinct moments of the social process (Bourdieu 1990b, pp. 128-129; 1991, p. 234; see also 1984, pp. 169ff.). Social actors, it must be insisted, are distributed across an objective structure of positions which conditions the probability that any particular set of individuals will share the same lifestyle, the same collective name, or an organizational membership.²⁹ Nevertheless, the differential probabilities that this structure generates can only give rise to social collectivities if individuals are able to construct adequate representations of it, and in particular, of the boundaries which simultaneously divide and unify them—whether these be the diffuse, porous frontiers arising through consumption or rigid, precise ones inscribed into state policy and law (see Bourdieu 1984, pp. 169ff.).³⁰ Social classes, we might say, can only arise through

²⁹ As Portes (2000) points out a propos of Grusky and Sørensen's (1998) theory, an approach that recognizes the "existence" of classes only where some type of economic (in their case, occupational) self-organization can be discerned leads to the awkward implication that some individuals—perhaps a majority—are "class-less." It follows that such an approach can provide little or no insight into the lifestyles, discourses, and associational patterns (etc.) of these individuals.

³⁰ Needless to say, the criteria by which the "adequacy" of a representation is to be assessed with respect to its social function of unifying and mobilizing are not the same criteria that would (or should) be used to assess its adequacy as an

the conjunction of two partially independent forces: the objective probabilities resulting from the structure of social space and the subjective “belief” in the existence of classes. As Wacquant states, “[c]lass lies neither in structures nor in agency alone but in their relationship as it is historically produced, reproduced, and transformed” (1991, p. 51). It is precisely this which Bourdieu (1990a, p. 135) asserts when he declares that a class is defined simultaneously by its “being” and its “being-perceived.”

Bourdieu always eschewed the grand historical narrative according to which class conflict is the “motor of history.” And, as we have seen, in his later work class is stripped of any meta-theoretical privileges it may have enjoyed in his general sociological orientation. As a result, this orientation is able to provide the tools needed to address the phenomena that are usually referred to (rather indiscriminately) in terms of the “decomposition” of the working class. Thus, The Weight of the World (Bourdieu et al. 1999), an ethnographic account of socially induced suffering in France that Bourdieu and a team of colleagues published in 1993, contains abundant evidence and analysis of ethnic antagonisms in the working class that have emerged in the wake of immigration, transformations of the industrial economy, and changes in the relation between credentials and jobs. And, drawing heavily on Bourdieu, Charlesworth’s (2000) ethnography of Rotherham, a town in northern England, documents a community in which de-industrialization has triggered the “decay” of an entire way of life. Unable to find their situation reflected in political speech and disconnected from union-centered traditions (which are themselves dissolving), the younger members of the working class—despite sharing a similar life conditions and a similar lifestyle—exhibit a collective identity that has slipped altogether below the threshold of discursive articulation. Under these conditions, their symbolic existence is reduced to what Bourdieu (1984, p. 178) calls a “lifestyle ‘in-itself’”—that is, its characteristic practices

analytic construct produced for the purpose of sociological study (see Bourdieu 1984, p. 473).

and objects function primarily as signs of deprivation, and thus, as stigmata (see Charlesworth 2000, esp. pp. 150-202).

Among class theorists, Bourdieu stands out for having conferred a centrality on symbolic practices of social classification. For reasons we have examined, this centrality points beyond questions of social class, ultimately encompassing all forms of social categorization (gender, race, nation, etc.). The symbolic, in Bourdieu's view, is a formidable but highly elusive type of power, one that effects a "mysterious alchemy" (1991, p. 233). Classification, as the application of symbolic schemes, is essentially a two-sided process. On the one hand, it categorizes, divides, and separates individuals, and through this, constructs social collectivities: "social magic always manages to produce discontinuity out of continuity" (Bourdieu 1991, p. 120). In doing so, it constitutes the collective identities through which social actors come to know themselves and others. On the other hand, classification also entails the "theatricalizing display" of underlying powers, resources, and privileges—whether these take the form of economic capital, cultural capital, male prerogatives, etc. In this capacity, it functions as a medium through which claims for social honor are expressed and recognized (or rejected). By means of these two functions, it contributes to maintenance or transformation of the social order.

When classificatory schemes are simultaneously sedimented into dispositions and inscribed into the order of things (i.e. into discourse, institutions, and law), a "complicity" can develop between habitus and world which is profoundly recalcitrant to change. In particular, mere denunciation and "symbolic provocation" are rarely adequate to fracture this deep-seated agreement between the subjective and the objective. Nevertheless, Bourdieu resolutely insisted that intellectuals, and social scientists, in particular, as holders of an immense cultural capital, have a crucial role to play in struggles opposing forms of subordination that rest, at least in part, on symbolic power. Capable of speaking with a certain authority about the social world, and thus of intervening in its representation, intellectuals

have the capacity to bring to light mechanisms of domination which were otherwise unnoticed and experiences of subjection which might otherwise have persisted beyond the limits of verbalization (see Bourdieu et al. 1999).³¹ With this capacity, however, come certain perils. In particular, social scientists jeopardize their ability to explore the connection between different classificatory strategies, on the one hand, and location in social space, on the other, when they allow their discourse to be hijacked by a particular classificatory viewpoint—one upon which they seek to confer the authority (and aura) of “science.” This is the case, for example, with crude assertions about the “death” or “life” of classes, which often amount to thinly euphemized expressions of the representational strategy of a particular group or fraction (Bourdieu 1987, pp. 2-3; 1990b, p. 179-180).

Bourdieu always maintained that intellectuals, by virtue of the cultural capital they hold, comprise a fraction of the dominant class. This implied that far from being “free-floating,” the classificatory propensities of intellectuals—often hinging on a distribution of honor or prestige that prioritizes things cultural over things material—were open to sociological investigation just like those of any other class or fraction. Bourdieu (1988; Bourdieu and

³¹ It is precisely for this reason that Bourdieu always considered sociology a critical discipline:

if there is no science but of the hidden, then the science of society is, per se, critical, without the scientist who chooses science ever having to choose to make a critique: the hidden is, in this case, a secret, and a well-kept one, even when no one is commissioned to keep it, because it contributes to the reproduction of a “social order” based on concealment of the most efficacious mechanisms of its reproduction and thereby serves the interests of those who have a vested interest in the conservation of that order. (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990, p. 218, note 34)

Wacquant 1992, pp. 62-74; see also Bourdieu 1990b, pp. 177-198) undertook this project with enthusiasm, conceiving of it as an opportunity to use sociology to reflexively generate an awareness of (and a measure of control over) the characteristic ways of viewing the social world that are peculiar to those who contemplate it for a living. At the same time, by acknowledging that intellectuals occupy their own determinate corner of social space, Bourdieu also refused the temptation to declare them the “organic” representatives of the dominated. And it remains a testament to his sociological lucidity that he insisted on this proposition throughout his career, willingly accepting all the ambiguities it implied for his political practice.

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