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# Culture as Class Symbolization or Mass Reification? A Critique of Bourdieu's *Distinction*<sup>1</sup>

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Pierre Bourdieu's theory of culture as a system of symbols furthering a misrecognition of class is critically compared to the Frankfurt school's theory of culture as reifying commodities furthering an unrecognition of class. Because of their approaches to history, both theories recognize only part of the complex reality of modern capitalist culture. Bourdieu's ahistorical structuralism fails to grasp the historical changes produced in culture by capitalism, while critical theory's essentialism fails to specify the concrete factors mediating the historical effects of capitalism on culture. As a corrective to both, a neo-Marxist theory is developed that grasps the totality of capitalist culture by grounding the effects of class on culture in concrete, historical class struggle.

The main theme of the voluminous and multifaceted sociological corpus of Pierre Bourdieu is the reintegration of the economic and cultural dimensions of society. Unlike many if not most sociologists, who reduce one dimension to the other, Bourdieu argues that culture and economy are intricately related in a web of mutual constitution. The class distinctions of the economy inevitably generate the symbolic distinctions of culture, which in turn regenerate and legitimate the class structure. Taking his cues largely from Weber, Bourdieu reveals class and status to be inextricably related dimensions of social life.

This project has culminated in Bourdieu's (1984) "big book," entitled *Distinction*. The results are impressive, both in theoretical conceptualization and empirical verification. Not since the Frankfurt school's efforts has there been such a serious attempt to reveal how culture and consumption contribute to the reproduction of the class system of modern society.

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And the efforts of Bourdieu are superior to those of Horkheimer, Adorno, and others in two respects. While their analysis of mass culture is most often abstract and philosophical, Bourdieu's analysis of cultural taste is painstakingly empirical. And while the Frankfurt school paints impassioned portraits of cultural conspiracies, the French sociologist offers up a cool blueprint of a structure of class and culture whose logic produces its effects behind the backs of individuals.

While Bourdieu has moved the analysis of class and culture beyond speculations of conspiracies, he has paid a price for this advance. Instead of transcending Frankfurt insights, *Distinction* merely abandons them. Gone is the idea of culture as reification, a mystified screen of things that obscures the real class relations between people. In its place is the Veblenesque concept of culture as a system of class symbols that reveal relative position in a game of invidious distinction. And more important still, Bourdieu abandons the concept of people as cultural actors engaged in praxis that is capable of revolutionizing as well as reproducing the class system. He discounts any real agency in favor of a class structure that is internalized in individuals and determines cultural choices that reproduce that class structure.

In what follows, I criticize Bourdieu's theory of culture and consumption around these two critical weaknesses highlighted by comparison to the Frankfurt school. First, I argue that Bourdieu overextends his model of culture as class symbols in a game of emulation. Although such a Veblenesque conception may be valid for the nonmaterial culture of late capitalist societies, the material culture more closely conforms to the Frankfurt school's notion of culture as mass reification. Bourdieu ignores the reification of material culture because his theory is ahistorical and fails to grasp the specificity of the culture of capitalism and the changing relations of production on which it is based. But the Frankfurt school conversely ignores the continued existence of class distinctions in nonmaterial culture because, while it recognizes the effects of changing class relations on culture, it fails to specify the historically concrete factors that mediate these effects.

Second, I show that Bourdieu's failure to grasp the reification of material culture is grounded in a more fundamental flaw—a structuralist conception of culture that reduces cultural choices to passive reproductions of structural necessities. By contrast, the Frankfurt school offers a more dialectical conception of culture as human praxis to realize human needs that may transform as well as reproduce class structure. But critical theory fails to specify the concrete historical conditions under which this praxis becomes either reproductive or revolutionary. I conclude that both theories and their supporting evidence may be incorporated into a

broader neo-Marxist theory of class legitimation, which grounds the effects of class on culture in historical class struggle.

#### BOURDIEU'S THEORY OF CULTURE AS A REPRODUCING STRUCTURE OF CLASS SYMBOLS

*Distinction* appears as the magnum opus of Bourdieu's long-term project to reintegrate the realm of culture into the sociology of stratification and class. Rejecting the one-sided materialism of Marxist class analysis, Bourdieu seeks to reveal the indispensable contribution that the consumption of symbolic goods makes to reproducing class domination through legitimation and selection. For him, self-interested behavior cannot be confined to the economic realm alone but must be theoretically generalized to cultural practices also. People pursue scarce goods and maximize their profits not only in economic "fields" of contest but also in cultural fields. As in economic struggles, people in cultural contests employ "capital" resources that they have acquired or inherited in their efforts to maximize their "profits." But in cultural fields of struggle these resources are "cultural capital"—symbolic abilities, tastes, and goods—and the returns are "symbolic profit," dividends of social honor or prestige (Bourdieu 1977, pp. 177–83).

Bourdieu's formulation sounds remarkably like Weber's multidimensional conflict theory, with its separate but interpenetrating struggles of class, status, and power. While acknowledging his debt to Weber, Bourdieu simultaneously distances himself from his specific formulations, stating that *Distinction* is "an endeavor to rethink Max Weber's opposition between class and *Stand*" (Bourdieu 1984, p. xii). In his historicist and nominalist framework, Weber postulates no universal relation between the two dimensions of stratification. Status, defined by life-style, may coincide with class, writes Weber (1968, p. 932), but the two normally stand in "sharp opposition." In his search for a general theory applicable to all societies, Bourdieu postulates an invariant relation of structural determination between economic position and life-style. For him, classes always appear as status groups, whose culturally stratified tastes and goods legitimate the system of economic domination by presenting it in a misrecognized form. Naked acts of class interest are clothed with the mantle of the selfless pursuit of commonly recognized symbolic goods, making winners appear not as exploiters but as gifted individuals with superior cultural endowment (Bourdieu 1977, pp. 163–65).

Bourdieu argues that the structure of economic positions is translated into and misrecognized as cultural symbols and life-styles inherent in individuals through the mediating structure of habitus. The habitus is a

system of durable dispositions that is socially conditioned by the objective structure of society. In the process of socialization, people in different class positions are exposed to different “material conditions of existence,” which give rise to characteristic ways of perceiving and being in the world. This deeply rooted habitus gives rise to all specific tastes in food, clothing, art, and so on. The habitus is thus a generative structure that provides the unifying principle of the specific practices in different cultural fields. But it is a social structure—the class structure so deeply embodied in individual dispositions that they appear natural and obscure their social origins (Bourdieu 1977, pp. 72–97).

The class structure of society becomes embodied in these habitus by determining the exposure of individuals to different material conditions of existence. Classes, Bourdieu states, are defined by different levels and types of capital, both economic and cultural. Individuals with little capital are continually exposed to material scarcities and the consequent economic necessity of making a living, while those with greater capital share an objective distance from the material urgencies of life. The distance from economic necessity conditions different class habitus, which in turn generate different cultural tastes (Bourdieu 1984, pp. 53–56, 169–75).

In *Distinction*, Bourdieu distinguishes three broad classes, each of which is unified by similar tastes and life-styles: the bourgeoisie, the petite bourgeoisie, and the working class (peasants and industrial workers). The bourgeois class possesses a high volume of capital, which distances it from the economic necessities of life. These material conditions engender a “taste for freedom,” a preference for cultural objects and practices that are removed from mundane material functions. This bourgeois taste engenders an “aesthetic disposition,” a propensity to stylize and formalize natural functions in order to lift them above mundane materiality and, in so doing, display their distance from this realm of necessity (Bourdieu 1984, pp. 18–63).

The bourgeois taste for freedom is defined in opposition to the working-class taste for necessity, which serves as a mere foil in the game of distinction. Having little capital, peasants and industrial workers must of necessity be constantly concerned with the practicalities of material existence. But Bourdieu contends that this economic necessity becomes ingrained as a taste, an actual choice or preference for things that are functional, natural, unformalized, and sensual. Bourdieu paints workers as down-to-earth creatures who reduce practices to their functions and are unconcerned about games of distinction (Bourdieu 1984, pp. 372–96).

Between these two main systems of class tastes is the petite bourgeoisie—those of moderate capital distinguished by their taste for pretension. The petite bourgeoisie aspires to bourgeois distinction but has neither the capital nor habitus to really achieve it. Hence, these

upstarts seek to superficially adopt a life-style not their own, to become something they are not by borrowing the outward signs of legitimate culture (Bourdieu 1984, pp. 318–71).

Bourdieu holds that the value society assigns each of these distinct class cultures is strictly arbitrary and determined solely by power. The dominant class is able to impose its life-style as the legitimate standard of judgment by sheer force, or “symbolic violence” (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977, pp. 4–8). But this arbitrary act of violence is hidden from view and thus accepted by the victims themselves. Consequently, those who possess the dominant culture have their power legitimated and reproduced. The economic power of their class is hidden behind a facade of individual cultural worthiness or giftedness, behind the “ideology of charisma.”

As others have noted (Elster 1983; Miller 1987), Bourdieu's conception of culture is highly reminiscent of that offered in Veblen's (1934) *Theory of the Leisure Class*. Both Bourdieu and Veblen conceive of life-styles as resources in a class contest for honor, which is won by that displaying the greatest distance from economic necessity. Bourdieu uses Veblen's concept of “conspicuous consumption,” arguing that the privileged display the abundance of their resources by ostentatious waste (Bourdieu 1984, pp. 55, 281–82). And his analysis of education as cultural capital is anticipated by the last chapter of *Theory of the Leisure Class*, entitled “Higher Learning as an Expression of the Pecuniary Culture” (pp. 363–400).

Bourdieu (1985*b*, 1988/89) forcefully denies any similarity of his ideas to the theory of conspicuous consumption. What he objects to most is Veblen's conception of consumption as a rational choice of certain goods and life-styles in the pursuit of distinction. In his theory distinctive conduct “has nothing to do with rational choice,” since it is the product of a habitus, a practical sense that is not consciously formulated or chosen (Bourdieu 1988/89, p. 783). But their different emphases on intentionality should not disguise the decisive similarity between Bourdieu and Veblen on the fundamental nature of culture. In conceiving of culture as necessarily oppressive, an inevitable support of the class system, Bourdieu's analysis shares what Adorno (1981*b*) calls Veblen's “attack on culture.” For both, all culture is barbaric because it is inextricably involved in the class struggle for dominance.

#### CAPITALIST CULTURE AS MASS REIFICATION: THE CHALLENGE OF THE FRANKFURT SCHOOL

*Distinction* surprisingly ignores the cultural theory of the Frankfurt school, which offers a powerful challenge to the book's Veblenesque

theory of class cultures. Although Frankfurt theorists like Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, and Herbert Marcuse share Bourdieu's intent of integrating Weber's concern for cultural legitimation with Marx's class analysis, they offer a different theoretical solution—late capitalist culture legitimates the class structure by *obscuring* classes altogether rather than establishing a hierarchy of honor between them. Bourdieu contends that culture legitimates class by furthering a *misrecognition*. Symbolic behavior displays class differences in a recognizable form, but one that diverts attention from their true origins in group power by making them appear as differences in individual worthiness. By contrast, Frankfurt or critical theorists argue that culture performs its ideological function for the class system by preventing any recognition of class differences, even a mistaken one. For them, culture makes classes totally *unrecognizable* by burying them beneath an indistinct mass culture shared by all.

The Frankfurt notion of a class-obscuring mass culture is developed through use of the Hegelian concept of reification, as adapted by Marx to the analysis of capitalism. Marx (1977, pp. 163–77) states that in capitalism the fundamental class relations between people appear as relations between things, commodities circulating in the market according to natural laws. In *History and Class Consciousness* (1971), Georg Lukács applies Marx's concept of economic reification to the cultural realm, arguing that capitalist culture legitimates exploitative class relations by hiding them behind unifying facades of nature. Adorno, Horkheimer, Marcuse, and others extend Lukács's analysis of reified culture to modern consumer capitalism, in which the production of cultural goods is taken over by large, concentrated industries whose sole motive is profits. As a result, culture becomes a commodity, whose production and distribution is subordinated to the technological rationality of domination in the factory and the marketplace. The culture industry produces art, music, and literature as commodities, subjecting them to the standardization and homogenization of mass production. In the process, all critical distinctions and disturbing connotations are eradicated from cultural commodities, so that they are palatable to the broadest possible market. This mass culture is offered to consumers as a compensation, a substitute satisfaction for the needs denied them as degraded and alienated producers in capitalism. And because all classes participate in this mass culture, albeit unequally, ostensible class differences are leveled by the consumption of its standardized commodities. Real qualitative differences in class power take on the appearance of merely quantitative differences in the possession of the same goods (Horkheimer and Adorno 1972; Marcuse 1964; Adorno 1978).

Frankfurt school theorists thus argue that culture is ideological not



because, as Bourdieu holds, it is “an expression of class standpoints” but because “the existence of classes is concealed by ideological appearances” (Adorno 1976, pp. 68, 55). In his *Introduction to the Sociology of Music*, Adorno specifically criticizes the type of empirical research generated by the former position, which seeks to associate specific cultural tastes with social class. “Inquiries into the social distributions and preferences of musical consumption tell us little about the class aspect” (1976, p. 56). Although he is probably criticizing the empiricist research of Paul Lazarsfeld, in whose Princeton Radio Research Project he participated, it is almost as if Adorno were referring to Bourdieu when he ridicules this type of research as equating “pure science with knowing whether middle-income urban housewives between the ages of 35 and 40 would rather hear Mozart or Tchaikovsky, and how they differ in this point from a statistically comparable group of peasant women. If anything at all has been surveyed here it is strata defined as subjectively characterized units. They must not be confused with the class as a theoretical-objective concept” (1976, p. 56).

Adorno argues that the cultural preferences of these strata are actually created by the manipulative marketing strategies of the culture industry. In order to hawk more wares, markets are divided and subdivided by social variables in market research, and products are differentiated and stratified to appeal to these niches. But these product distinctions, which lend cultural goods a pseudoindividuality to placate the need for real individuality denied in production, are in reality superficial differentiations of fundamentally similar goods. They do not correspond to but conceal class differences (Horkheimer and Adorno 1972, pp. 121–24, 154–56).

The differentiation offered consumers by the culture industry is superficial not only because its products are in reality produced in a standardized production process but also because they are consumed in a standardized process that cuts across all social categories. Bourdieu (1984, p. 100) sustains his theory of class cultures by holding that even when objectively identical products are consumed by different classes, they are appropriated and perceived differentially according to their respective habitus. By contrast, Frankfurt theorists support their theory of mass culture by arguing that even when objectively different products are consumed by different classes, they are appropriated similarly, thus leveling any cultural differences between classes. Bourdieu explicitly offers (1984, p. 588) what he thinks is a devastating criticism of Adorno's analysis of popular music by showing that legitimate music is also repetitive and passively consumed. But that is precisely the point of Adorno's (1978) critique of music that is dominated by the culture industry. Despite the



ostensible differences in content, both popular and classical music are consumed in the same fetishistic form, in which the popularity or market success of the composition is valued over its intrinsic worth as art. In material products like automobiles, such consumption focuses not on the intrinsic quality of the mechanism but the fetish of the trademark, which testifies to the car's standing in the artificial prestige hierarchy. Such consumption offers people ersatz satisfaction of their unfulfilled needs and conceals the real differences in class power beneath a mass of artificially differentiated commodities.

The Frankfurt school's theory of mass culture has been justly criticized for certain weaknesses. Bourdieu (1984, p. 386) correctly points out that critical theorists often commit the short-circuit fallacy—establishing a direct, unmediated link between economic structure and cultural practices. They do not make explicit how and why the reified, class-obscuring logic of capitalism infiltrates and dominates culture. The implicit answers are rather functionalist and essentialist. The capitalist system requires a mass culture that hides class divisions to reproduce itself, so it emerges. This functionalism often degenerates into crude instrumentalism, in which omnipotent elites consciously manipulate culture to perpetuate the domination of the masses, who passively accept whatever is foisted on them (Kellner 1984–85; Miller 1987).

Despite these problems I think that critical theory's conception of a mass culture that obscures class differences is a powerful and indispensable tool for understanding the legitimating role of culture in late capitalism. But it should be conceptualized as a complement, not as an alternative, to Bourdieu's conception of a culture of class symbolization. Both theories capture part of the cultural reality of late capitalism but err in generalizing from this part to the cultural whole.

#### CLASS CULTURE OR MASS CULTURE: EMPIRICAL ARGUMENTS

There is good empirical evidence from a variety of sources to at least partially validate Bourdieu's idea of culture as symbolizing class differences as well as the Frankfurt school's notion of a mass culture obscuring class differences. Although this evidence may seem at first contradictory or at least inconsistent, a close examination reveals that it is drawn from different parts of the cultural reality of late capitalism.

In order to bring empirical data to bear on this debate, we first need to clarify the exact nature of the disagreement between Bourdieu and the Frankfurt theorists. Both theories postulate differences of attitudes and outlooks between classes. There is ample empirical evidence that documents these subjective differences generated by class position, most of it

consistent with Bourdieu's characterization of class habitus.<sup>2</sup> The two theories differ, however, on how and whether subjective class differences are objectified in cultural consumption and life-style. Bourdieu argues that class differences produce visible cultural differences in all fields, but because these cultural differences are mistakenly perceived as originating in individual worthiness rather than class position, they end up legitimating the class system. The Frankfurt theorists contend that subjective class differences are obscured by the objective homogeneity of mass culture, which legitimates the class system by making its real differences invisible.

Bourdieu offers a great deal of empirical data from his and others' surveys that purport to reveal objective differences in cultural consumption between the classes. But upon close examination these data do not unequivocally support the broad theoretical generalizations of the text. The evidence for class differences is systematically stronger in fields of nonmaterial culture like visual art, music, and literature than in fields of material culture like food, clothing, and furniture. Thus, for example, in the field of music, class is clearly and strongly associated with knowledge of and preference for legitimate or classical music. When asked which musical compositions they preferred, 1% of the working class chose the legitimate works, as opposed to around 30% of the upper class. And when asked to identify the composers of 16 classical works, none of the manual or clerical workers but over 20% of the upper class named more than 12 (Bourdieu 1984, pp. 15, 64). In the field of visual art, the upper class displayed its formal aesthetic by stating much more frequently than the working class (20% and 6%, respectively) that an object socially designated as meaningless, like a cabbage, could make a beautiful painting. The working class revealed its functionalist aesthetic by stating a greater preference than the upper class (88% compared to about 60%) for superficially pretty subjects like a sunset over the sea (Bourdieu 1984, pp. 37–38).

Bourdieu's data in these fields are supported by other studies, which also found a positive correlation between class position and preference for and participation in the high arts (DiMaggio and Useem 1978*a*, 1978*b*, 1982; Blau 1986; Hughes and Peterson 1983; Gruenberg 1983). Research by Paul DiMaggio and his associates also seems to support Bourdieu's thesis that cultural capital in this area of high arts acts as a means of class selection and reproduction. They have demonstrated that interest in and familiarity with high arts is positively related to student grades,

<sup>2</sup> For a good summary of the evidence on subjective class differences, see Randall Collins (1975, pp. 67–87; 1988, pp. 208–20).

educational attainment, and the status of future spouses (DiMaggio 1982*a*; DiMaggio and Mohr 1985).

The data do not, however, seem sufficiently strong to support Bourdieu's contention that class life-styles are sharply segmented and insular. There appear to be no rigid class boundaries between popular culture and high culture. Although the upper class clearly has more knowledge of and participation in high culture, research has also shown consistently that its members also participate in the popular culture, often at levels commensurate with the lower classes. For example, in his study of the cultural activities of American men, Wilensky (1964) found that while the more educated spent more time consuming high culture than the less educated, they spent a great deal more time absorbing popular culture. DiMaggio and Useem (1978*a*) found that the well educated and persons of high occupational prestige did and liked more of almost all culture. Bourdieu's own data seem to reflect the existence of this mass culture, in which all classes participate, alongside the high culture dominated by the upper class. For example, although a much larger proportion of the upper class (20%) stated that a cabbage could make a beautiful painting than did the working class (5%), a majority of all classes stated that a sunset over the sea made a beautiful painting. And while the upper class expressed a greater preference for legitimate music than the working class, a substantial proportion of all classes expressed a preference for popular music (Bourdieu 1984, pp. 64, 37–38).

The existence of a common, mass culture seems even more prominent in the area of material culture. While Bourdieu claims that class habitus dictate the consumption of different types of physical products, his data belie this generalization and indicate class differences significantly smaller than those revealed in nonmaterial culture. In the field of food, for example, Bourdieu claims that the working-class taste for necessity dictates foods that are fatty and heavy, while the bourgeois taste for freedom dictates lighter, leaner foods. Yet data on the distribution of expenditures among the various food categories are surprisingly similar across classes. Manual workers spent 2.4% of their food budget on fresh fruit, while senior executives spent 3.1%; on fats, workers 5.3%, executives 4.3%; on beef, 8.1% versus 9.8%; on fresh vegetables, 5.4% versus 5.5%; on cereals, 8.9% versus 7.5% (Bourdieu 1984, pp. 181–82, 188–89). We are told that the working-class meal stresses informality and abundance, while the bourgeois meal stresses formality and ceremony. But the data presented reveal that differences between the classes are small. Even when entertaining guests, the majority of all classes preferred to offer guests a full meal rather than a buffet, liked their guests to dress casually rather than elegantly, and preferred for guests to choose their own places rather than designating places. And while working-class

people answered more frequently than the middle or upper class that the most important aspect of spontaneous entertaining was having enough to eat (34%, 28%, and 26%, respectively) nearly an identical proportion of workers (33%) answered that it was important that guests not be bored (Bourdieu 1984, pp. 198–99).

In the field of domestic furnishings, Bourdieu tells the reader that the working-class taste for necessity is expressed in the preference for homes that are clean and practical, while the bourgeois taste for freedom imbues preference for the studied and imaginative interior. The data reveal that higher occupational groups did describe the ideal domestic interior as “imaginative” and “studied” more often than the lower groups, who were more likely to mention “clean” and “practical” in their descriptions. But the adjectives most frequently used by nearly all groups, high and low, were “comfortable” and “cozy” (Bourdieu 1984, pp. 247–48).

A recent ethnography of blue-collar workers lends credence to this notion that a mass culture shared by all classes and centered largely on material commodities exists alongside a high culture dominated by the upper class and focused on nonmaterial arts. In his study of chemical workers in one New Jersey refinery, David Halle (1984) found that their distinctive position at work led to subjective attitudes and beliefs that were clearly different from white-collar employees. The blue-collar workers were generally dissatisfied with their work and resentful of their immediate bosses and corporate power in general. They held few aspirations for individual advancement but pinned their hopes for the future on collectively won gains in wages and benefits.<sup>3</sup> So on the job Halle's workers saw themselves as “working men” and, with a certain amount of class consciousness, marked themselves off from white-collar employees and managers. But outside of work these subjective attitudes were not objectified in a distinctive class style of cultural consumption. These well-paid blue-collar workers led leisure lives rather similar to white-collar employees, for their overlapping incomes allowed them to purchase similar goods and services. Halle (1984, p. 294) concludes: “In modern America there are no ‘working-class’ cars, washing machines, video recorders, or even, with some exceptions concentrated on the young, styles of dress. In an urban department store or a suburban shopping mall, it is hard to know if a customer has a blue- or a white-collar occupation.”

In the world of cultural consumption these chemical workers did not see themselves as a distinct group but as part of a broad “middle class” in a continuum of consumption that overlapped and blurred the class oppositions of work. In a study of similarly affluent manual workers in

<sup>3</sup> These findings are validated by other studies of blue-collar workers. See, e.g., Goldthorpe et al. (1969); Chinoy (1965); and Nichols and Beynon (1977).

England, Goldthorpe et al. (1969, p. 147) also found that their privatized and materially abundant leisure lives caused them to view themselves as part of a large central class defined not by power or prestige but by income and material living standards. Coleman and Rainwater (1978, pp. 24–33) similarly found that a majority of all Americans perceived the class system not as a rigidly delineated structure but as a complex, infinitely graded hierarchy of income and consumption. And positions in this imbricated hierarchy were legitimated by beliefs in differences not of natural giftedness or merit, as Bourdieu contends, but of effort and ambition (p. 241).

In detailing the participation of blue-collar workers in a broad mass or “middle-class” culture, Halle lists mainly material commodities they shared with others. He found, however, that these chemical workers did feel distinct and inferior with respect to some forms of nonmaterial culture—namely, the high arts and education. Few of these workers had any interest in classical music, ballet, opera, or literature. And they felt uneasy and inadequate about their lack of formal education. Most described their experiences in school as humiliating and were openly hostile to the teachers who judged them as inadequate. And the part of their education that many felt most uncomfortable with and hostile toward was the high arts. In the fields of high arts and education, culture seems to mark out class distinctions, as Bourdieu contends. By doing so, it legitimates the class structure by making the lower classes feel inadequate, and reproduces it by selecting for educational success only those already inculcated with cultural capital (Halle 1984, pp. 48–50, 130–32, 169–70, 208, 295).

The empirical evidence reviewed thus far reveals that both Bourdieu’s theory of class symbolization and the Frankfurt school’s theory of mass reification have validity, but for different aspects of the culture of late capitalist societies. There do appear to be distinct differences in the consumption of nonmaterial culture, especially the high arts, which objectify and legitimate class positions. But in the realm of material commodities, there exists a qualitatively indistinct mass culture, which obscures class divisions behind a mass of material goods that distinguish individuals solely by the quantity of their income. My own study of one prominent artifact of contemporary material culture, the automobile, further demonstrates the limits of Bourdieu’s generalizations about class cultures.<sup>4</sup>

Bourdieu (1984, p. 231) writes that consumer goods are produced in a variety of forms that express the distinct tastes of classes and class frac-

<sup>4</sup> My study of American automobile design will appear in a book tentatively entitled *Auto Opium: A Social History of American Automobile Design to 1970*. For a preliminary summary, see Gartman (1986b).

tions because each group has its own producers. The competitive struggles between producers in the marketplace lead each to produce a distinct product. And each supply finds a matching demand, not because producers come from the same class as their consumers but because producers' positions in the field of production—rearguard versus avant-garde, established versus outsider—are homologous to class positions consumers occupy in the field of consumption (Bourdieu 1984, pp. 230–34; 1983, pp. 325–26; 1986, pp. 138–49).

But this generalization is certainly not true of the automobile, which Bourdieu uses to exemplify his theory (1984, pp. 128–29, 278–79, 548–51). Bourdieu's theory assumes a highly competitive market in which numerous producers jockey to find consumers, but the market for American automobiles, like many other material commodities, is unquestionably oligopolistic. The handful of huge corporations that dominate production do not specialize in one market niche but offer a wide range of products that blankets all markets, from the cheapest to the most expensive. And the different automobile models offered by each oligopolistic corporation cannot appeal to specific class tastes because they are all designed by the same designers. Typically, the automobile designers of a corporation are not responsible to one of its several model-producing divisions but are grouped in a staff department directly responsible to top corporate managers. Often working in a separate center geographically and organizationally removed from divisional managers, this design staff is responsible for the aesthetics of the entire range of corporate products, from the cheapest to the most expensive. Although there is often a separate studio for each division, this separation exists not to create products that differ fundamentally in aesthetics to appeal to different class tastes but to superficially differentiate the few structural foundations from which all corporate cars are produced. The different automotive nameplates of each corporation generally share the same few body shells, which are given distinct divisional identities by the addition of largely superficial details: headlights, taillights, grilles, fenders.

The empirical facts of automobile design reveal that these artificially differentiated models do not and cannot appeal to a variety of distinct class tastes. If this were the aim, design personnel would have to be rigidly specialized by division, spending their entire careers cultivating a specific class style. But in most corporations designers are juggled around constantly. And independent designers who contract with corporations also design a variety of automobiles across the entire price spectrum. What is more, my interviews with auto designers reveal that they do not apply different aesthetic standards to different lines of autos. They try to accomplish the same basic look in all lines. For example, economy cars that sell to lower-income groups are not designed specifically to

appeal to their inherent “functionalist aesthetic.” Designers know that no one wants a car that looks cheap, that screams stripped-down functionality. So they attempt to make economy cars look as much like their expensive corporate relatives as is possible within the cost restraints given them and while maintaining the separate identities of the lines. The quantity of features and embellishments on the various makes in the automobile hierarchy are varied by designers to justify the price differences. But the quality of aesthetics is basically the same across the hierarchy, so the graded models cannot testify to distinct class tastes. More expensive cars offer those with more money to spend not qualitatively different aesthetics to testify to superior taste but merely more of what everyone has a taste for.

Empirical evidence on automobiles and other artifacts of material culture is more compatible with the Frankfurt school’s arguments that modern culture legitimates class by obscuring rather than symbolizing class differences. The qualitative hierarchy of class power is obscured by a quantitative hierarchy of material consumption in which people are differentiated by the income rewards of a seemingly equitable market. Hierarchies of material products like autos ideologically transform the *contradiction* of class power into a *continuum* of consumption, in which position is legitimated not by inborn taste but by individual market efforts, as surveys routinely reveal (Coleman and Rainwater 1978, pp. 24–33, 241; Goldthorpe et al. 1969, pp. 146–56).

#### HISTORY, CLASS, AND CULTURE

The empirical evidence shows that there is a partial truth in the theories of both Bourdieu and the Frankfurt school. While the material culture of consumer commodities in late capitalist societies seems to obscure the differences between classes, the nonmaterial culture, especially the high arts, demonstrates distinct cleavages that symbolize classes. I believe the partial vision of each is explained by their respective approaches to historical development. Bourdieu’s basically ahistorical theory projects onto capitalism a model of class and culture derived from a precapitalist past and thus fails to capture the cultural dynamics introduced by the specific class relations of capitalism. The Frankfurt school’s essentialist theory overgeneralizes the historical trends introduced into culture by capitalist commodity relations and thus fails to recognize the persistence of certain precapitalist cultural relations. I propose to correct both theories by a neo-Marxist approach to culture that focuses on the mediating factor of historical class struggle.

Bourdieu (1984, p. xii) asserts that the relationship between class and culture presented in *Distinction* is “valid . . . for every stratified soci-



ety." He acknowledges some historical variation in modes of class domination and their legitimation. But his theory of historical development is a severely truncated, two-stage model in which the relation between class and culture changes only in form. Bourdieu distinguishes between precapitalist and capitalist societies on the basis of the degree of objectification and autonomy of economic and cultural capital. In precapitalist societies, economic and cultural resources are uninstitutionalized and undifferentiated from each other. Relations of economic domination are direct and personal, reproduced in daily interaction through the exercise of violence. To secure legitimation, the economic capital used to dominate others is continuously translated into and disguised as the cultural or symbolic capital of honor in personal ceremonies like potlatches and gift exchanges (Bourdieu 1977, pp. 171–97).

With the coming of industrial capitalism, however, the market institutionalizes economic capital, making it objective and impersonal. Industrialization also renders cultural capital autonomous from economic capital. The increasing income and education of the dominated classes creates a large, culture-consuming public and, consequently, cultural institutions independent of the dominant class. Producers in this field of mass-cultural production serving the lower classes are motivated by economic profit to seek the largest possible market and hence reduce standards to the lowest common denominator. Alongside them, however, emerges a separate field of restricted production, where cultural goods are produced for other culture-goods producers in the pursuit of symbolic profit through adherence to disinterested aesthetic standards (Bourdieu 1985*a*, pp. 14–33; 1983, pp. 319–22).

Bourdieu contends that in early capitalism the economic and cultural fields remain separate. The objective mechanism of the market itself hides inequalities of economic capital, so there is no need for a symbolic veil of misrecognition. But this early stage ends when, as Bourdieu vaguely states, the ideological effects of the market are "uncovered and neutralized." Consequently, legitimation of class domination requires a return to cultural misrecognition of economic capital through its conversion into symbolic capital (Bourdieu 1977, p. 196). This is accomplished by the bourgeois consumption of the cultural products of the field of restricted production, to which their habitus naturally inclines them. Such consumption not only distinguishes the bourgeoisie from the working class but also consecrates it with the air of disinterestedness and personal worthiness that accompanies this cultural realm autonomous from the economic market (Bourdieu 1983, pp. 324–25, 335–37; 1985*a*, pp. 22, 31–32). So after a brief separation of economic and cultural capital in early capitalism, once again the two are integrated in a system of legitimation in which class power is misrecognized as individual gifted-

ness or charisma. Bourdieu's history of class ideologies is not really much of a history at all, but the story of an eternally occurring relation that changes only in form.

This essentially ahistorical formulation fails to recognize the historical specificity of the culture of capitalism and the relations of production on which it is based. Bourdieu generalizes the peculiarly precapitalist ideology of charisma into capitalist societies. Following Weber, he uses the concept to denote a system of beliefs that legitimates differences in power by reference to the intrinsic qualities of individuals displayed in distinctive life-styles. But Weber confines charismatic authority mainly to precapitalist societies, in which personal power relations require ideologies that justify the person as superior. He argues (1968, pp. 241–54) that the rationalization process brings the impersonal rule of economic and political bureaucracies, in which authority is justified by the rationality of the structure, not the worthiness of individuals.

Bourdieu ignores this change in the nature of cultural legitimation largely due to his conceptualization of class, which rejects the Marxist emphasis on positions in production in favor of a Weberian emphasis on positions in the distribution of goods.<sup>5</sup> He defines class as a structural position in a distributional space of two resources: economic capital and cultural capital. An individual's combined returns from these two fields determine his or her class position. In modern societies, primary class differences are determined by the overall volume of combined capital, with secondary differences (class fractions) derived from the relative proportion of the two different capitals held (Bourdieu 1984, pp. 99–125).

But this definition of class has a tautological relation to culture, the variable it is constructed to explain. Bourdieu explains variation in culture and life-style by class position, yet he defines class in part by the distribution of cultural capital. Since the latter is acquired through socialization in the family or school, the explanation degenerates into simplistic cultural transmission—classes have different life-styles because they learn different life-styles at home or in school. This argument begs the question of how these transmitted class life-styles originate to begin with and ignores what is supposedly the intervening variable between class and life-style—habitus engendered by conditions of material existence.

Bourdieu sidesteps this tautological problem at places by giving subtle primacy to economic over cultural capital in determining life-style. He states in one passage (1977, p. 83), for example, that class habitus “are engendered by the objective structures, that is, in the last analysis, by

<sup>5</sup> Bourdieu (1985*b*, 1987) rejects Marxist class analysis on the grounds of its substantialism, economism, and objectivism. These criticisms are, however, simplistic and fail to acknowledge the diversity of 20th-century Western Marxism. For a good discussion of Bourdieu and Marx on class, see Brubaker (1985).

the economic bases of the social formation in question." And in *Distinction* (1984, pp. 115, 136), positions in the economic base are defined mainly in terms of income. So in the last analysis Bourdieu argues that income engenders habitus, which in turn determine consumption (1984, p. 375).

Bourdieu's analysis of class as position in economic *distribution* fails to capture the historical changes in economic *production* that condition culture. Because the distribution of resources remains similarly unequal across capitalist and precapitalist societies, he postulates class cultures that similarly symbolize this inequality. Marxism's focus on class as relations of production makes it potentially more cognizant of historical changes induced in culture. For Marxists, the distribution of market incomes in capitalism is epiphenomenal, the surface appearance determined by the relations between classes in production. At this level exists the more fundamental inequality of power to control the process of social labor.

The Frankfurt theorists of mass culture focus on this Marxist conception of class inequality to explain the historically variant forms of cultural legitimation. Following Marx (1977, pp. 170–71) and Lukács (1971, pp. 83–110), they argue that the relations of labor control in precapitalist societies are direct and personal. Precapitalist culture bears the marks of these direct relations of subordination, for it is obviously the exclusive preserve of the dominant classes who alone have the power and resources to cultivate and appropriate nonessential goods. However, with the rise of capitalism the relations of power in production become indirect, with workers subordinated to capitalists through the impersonal exchange of labor power for wages. Thus, class relations become reified, appearing not as human power relations but as relations between things exchanged in the market. With Lukács, critical theorists argue that the reified relations of production are extended to culture as it becomes produced by large-scale, commercial enterprises. Mass production reduces the distinctions of cultural products, thus hiding the real differences in class power behind a facade of standardized things consumed by all.

While their historical focus on changing forms of class domination in production makes critical theorists more cognizant of changing forms of class legitimation, their use of history is flawed by its essentialism. Heavily influenced by Hegel, the Frankfurt school gives us a history of class and culture that reads like the unfolding of an essence inherent in capitalism. The concrete, mediating mechanisms that account for the spread of economic reification into the cultural realm are not specified, as Bourdieu points out. This essentialist inattention to historical mediations leads critical theory to ignore the differential effects of reification on culture.

Bourdieu's ahistoricism leads him to postulate the persistence of a

basically precapitalist culture of class symbolization, while the Frankfurt theorists' essentialism leads them to postulate the universal reification of all capitalist culture. A more powerful theory of class legitimation requires a historical model that recognizes the effects of changing class relations on culture but specifies the concrete mediations that explain their differential effects. The corrective to both theories is a model of cultural legitimation in which historical human praxis—that is, class struggle—provides the crucial mediating link between class structure and cultural production.

#### CULTURE AS STRUCTURE OR CULTURE AS PRAXIS

Beneath Bourdieu's ahistorical analysis lies a more fundamental problem that prevents him from recognizing the partial reification of capitalist culture—his conceptualization of culture as a structure that inevitably reproduces the society. Bourdieu's structuralist approach conceives of classes as the passive recipients of a culture that reproduces the structure of domination and carries little potential to transform it.

Bourdieu claims his theory offers a theoretical middle ground between structuralism and philosophies of action by specifying the conceptual link of habitus between objective structures and subjective actions. People chose their actions but not freely, for the dispositions internalized from their structural positions govern these choices (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977, pp. 203–4, 217, n. 31). So Bourdieu's actors do not really act or choose anything—"these enacted choices imply no acts of choosing"—for their actions and choices are predetermined by their habitus (Bourdieu 1984, p. 474). Aesthetic tastes and consumer preferences are really determined by class position—people choose what they are already condemned to. "Taste is *amor fati*, the choice of destiny, but a forced choice, produced by conditions of existence which rule out all alternatives as mere daydreams and leave no choice but the taste for the necessary" (Bourdieu 1984, p. 178). Consequently, these tastes and the cultural practices they motivate inevitably and inexorably reproduce the structures that produce them.

There is contest and struggle in Bourdieu's theory. He postulates that people are incessantly, but not necessarily rationally, pursuing strategies to optimize the returns from their capital within a given field. But these struggles take place solely within the predetermined confines of the field and rarely challenge the rules of the game themselves (DiMaggio 1979, p. 1470). Class conflict in Bourdieu never seems to contradict or change the class structure because it is largely limited to intraclass struggle within the bourgeoisie. He confines his attention almost exclusively to the struggle for power between the dominant and the dominated fractions of the

bourgeoisie and the struggle for symbolic capital within the latter (Bourdieu 1983, pp. 319–26). This intraclass strife never fundamentally challenges the class structure of capitalism, since all bourgeois fractions have an interest in their joint domination of the working class.

Bourgeois struggles for symbolic capital within fields of restricted cultural production do often transform these fields and lead to changes in literature, education, and art. Historic shifts in the relative scarcity of resources within fields disrupt the equilibrium established between the objective opportunities for success within it and the subjective expectations (*habitus*) of individual participants. Such disruptions give rise to cultural struggles between established and parvenu cultural fractions that change a field. In *Homo Academicus* (1988), for example, Bourdieu argues that in the field of education the increase in the number of students and teachers in the 1960s caused a devaluation of their credentials on the job market. This, in turn, produced a discrepancy between the career expectations they internalized under the previous structure and the objective opportunities credentials afforded in the changed structure of the field. The result of this discrepancy was the revolt in the universities culminating in May 1968.

Such challenges to established bourgeois cultural authorities often find resonance within the dominated class due to its homologous position of exclusion and domination. In the May 1968 revolt, for example, upstart students and teachers found temporary support among industrial workers, who were similarly degraded by established educational authorities. However, the course of events usually reveals that bourgeois intellectual challengers have no interest in eliminating cultural authority per se, but merely securing a greater share for themselves. So interclass alliances ultimately dissolve, and temporary “breaks in equilibrium” are restored to the field as the transformed structure of opportunities is internalized in agents (Bourdieu 1988, pp. 156, 167).

So, for Bourdieu, cultural changes are caused not by fundamental struggles between classes with inherently divergent interests but by shifts in resources between individuals and class fractions maneuvering in cultural markets to monopolize symbolic capital. He depicts the dominated class of capitalism as almost completely passive and powerless. Workers actually have a taste for the cultural practices and goods forced upon them by their subordinate class position. In contrast to the bourgeois taste for freedom, the working class has a taste for necessity, for undisguised objects and practices that do not seek to hide their relations to animal functions. Workers have so thoroughly internalized their own domination that they must rely on the symbolic tools supplied externally by bourgeois intellectuals to organize and express their interests. But because these tools are bourgeois in origin, they are limited in their chal-

lence of the totality of bourgeois society (Bourdieu 1985*b*, pp. 735–44; 1984, pp. 397–465).

Bourdieu's conception of the working class is at once degrading and exalting. He degrades it to the level of an unreflective, animal existence. Workers are "natural" creatures who, because they are reduced to sheer physical labor by the class system, develop a taste for base and animal pleasures (Bourdieu 1984, p. 32). But having thus reduced workers to simple animals, Bourdieu then exalts this animality as the natural form of existence and uses it to launch an attack on the hypocrisy of bourgeois culture. Workers play the role of Rousseau-like noble savages, who are unsullied by the game of cultural distinction played by the bourgeoisie and its "petite" pretenders. Their popular realism "inclines working people to reduce practices to the reality of their function, to do what they do, and be what they are . . . , without 'kidding themselves.' . . . [It is] the near-perfect antithesis of the aesthetic disavowal which, by a sort of essential hypocrisy . . . masks the interest in function by the primacy given to form, so that what people do, they do as if they were not doing it" (Bourdieu 1984, p. 200).

In contrast to Bourdieu's structuralist theory of culture as a reproducing structure, the critical theory of culture as reification is based upon a conception of culture as praxis, a struggle to realize inherent human needs that may fundamentally transform as well as reproduce class structure. For critical theorists, especially Herbert Marcuse, cultural action may contradict and change the social structures in which it is exercised because it has an ontological basis in human needs that are transhistorical. They follow the early Marx in postulating that human beings are by nature active, self-creating creatures whose consciousness gives them the potential for self-determination, activity free from necessity. The historical mode of production constrains and limits the realization of this potential, but it can never totally suppress the natural desire for freedom. While Bourdieu postulates the pursuit of freedom to be a structurally conditioned taste characteristic of the dominant class alone, critical theory holds that the praxis of all people is underwritten by a basic desire for freedom (Marx 1964; Marcuse 1966).

For critical theorists, culture is a realm of praxis that expresses these transhistorical needs and cannot be simply reduced to the social function of reproducing the class structure, as Bourdieu seeks to do. Historically, culture serves a utopian function—it is the expression of the need for freedom that is denied by the class organization of society. While this utopian function can help to maintain the society by providing a safety valve for discontent, it also retains in the collective consciousness the longing for fulfillments which the existing society cannot provide. Consequently, culture always has a negative component that cannot be totally

subordinated to the reproduction of the system. Although modern, reified mass culture exhibits a tendency to eliminate this critical component, even it exhibits utopian strivings for self-determination that cannot be completely absorbed by the class system (Aronowitz 1981; Adorno 1981*a*; Horkheimer and Adorno 1972; Jameson 1979, 1983; Marcuse 1964, 1966, 1969, 1978).

The weakness in the Frankfurt school's formulation of culture as human praxis to realize freedom is that it is historically underdetermined. Critical theorists tell us little about the specific historical conditions under which cultural praxis becomes either ideological or revolutionary. But this weakness can be corrected by replacing this vague, socially dislocated and historically unspecified praxis by concrete, historical class struggle. The crucial mediating factor that determines the effect of the class structure of a society on its cultural productions is neither Bourdieu's inexorably reproducing habitus or critical theory's dislocated praxis but the socially located, historically specific conflict of dominant and dominated classes. Such an approach is embodied in the pioneering work of Georg Lukács.

In several places, Bourdieu (1983, p. 336; as quoted in Wacquant 1989, pp. 33–34) includes Lukács in his criticism of Lucien Goldmann and other Marxist literary critics for their short-circuit fallacy—that is, making direct and naive connections between the class positions of writers and their cultural productions. Although this fallacy may be characteristic of Goldmann and some Frankfurt theorists, it is not relevant to Lukács, who does not reduce the form or content of a cultural production to the class position of its producer. If truly guilty of such a simplistic reductionism, he would have no grounds for praising the works of some bourgeois writers over others or for condemning the productions of some proletarian writers (Lukács 1973*a*, 1973*b*, 1962, 1980*a*, 1980*b*). Lukács, like Bourdieu, postulates an important mediating factor between a writer's class position and the nature of the work. But his mediating factor is not a static, reproducing habitus but the dynamic, historical struggle of classes for liberation.

Lukács postulates that the interests of a writer's class position impose cognitive limits on his or her productions, but the nature of these interests is determined by the class's changing relation to humanity's progressive struggles for freedom. So, for example, he argues that the narrative style of bourgeois realists like Balzac, Dickens, and Tolstoy, which depicts reality as a historical creation of the strivings of human beings, is the consequence of the bourgeoisie's progressive struggles against the feudal order in the formative stages of capitalism. Because at this time the bourgeoisie was engaged in the struggle against feudalism—a struggle that served not only its particular interest but the general interest of



humanity in freedom—its cultural producers were able to see the reality of society as a human creation and embody it in narrative about active characters.

After the revolutions of 1848, however, capitalism was consolidated in most Western European societies, and the bourgeois ruling class had an interest no longer in progressive change but in reactionary protection of its rule against the class to whom history passed the interest in freedom, the proletariat. The cultural result of this changed position vis-à-vis class struggle was the descriptive style of bourgeois modernists like Joyce and Flaubert. No longer having an interest in progressive change, bourgeois writers were blinded to the nature of reality as a human creation and began to depict the world as a static, reified thing. In their novels, these writers merely described the established facts of society and created characters who passively adopt various subjective attitudes toward them. People and their relations are not developed but merely described as already constituted products of forces beyond their control. The reality of class and struggle is thus obscured behind this impenetrable facade of static things (Lukács 1973*a*, 1973*b*).

In this Lukácsian formulation, cultural works are understood as reflecting not static class position but active interventions in historic class struggles that may transform, not merely reproduce, social structures. In their productions, cultural producers resolve in formal, imaginary ways the problems and dilemmas of a class in conflict with others. These interventions are always political, although perhaps unconsciously so, since they are the product of, first, the class position of the producer and, second, the historical relation (progressive or reactionary) of that class to the struggles for human liberation (Jameson 1971, pp. 375–400). This theory of culture is in a better position than either Bourdieu or the Frankfurt school to capture the complexities of modern capitalist culture. Unlike Bourdieu's theory of a reproducing structure, it grasps culture as an active praxis that may transform society. And this more historically grounded theory also specifies through the mediating factor of class struggle how and to what extent this praxis influences culture.

Elsewhere (Gartman 1986*b*), I have used this theory to explain the historical development of class-obscuring, reified automobile designs. In what follows I summarize this research to demonstrate the efficacy of the class-struggle theory of culture. The earliest automobiles were expensive, handcrafted vehicles produced in limited numbers by highly skilled workers and consumed almost exclusively by the high bourgeoisie. They were part of an exclusive high culture of conspicuous consumption and leisure constructed by the bourgeoisie during the late 19th and early 20th centuries to legitimate its increasingly visible authority in industry and state in the face of working-class challenges (DiMaggio 1982*b*, 1982*c*, 1987).

These vehicles symbolized a life of leisure and discretion, not only by their largely recreational use by the wealthy but also by their aesthetics. The carefully crafted fit and finish of these cars testified to an unhurried, organic labor process controlled by skilled workers insulated from the hurrying pressures of market and management.

The lure of large-scale commercial gain, however, led some automakers like Ford to move toward the mass production of cheap, standardized vehicles in the 1910s. But the skilled working class resisted capitalist efforts to quicken and cheapen their labor. To overcome this resistance, manufacturers revolutionized the labor process, replacing skilled craft labor with largely unskilled, divided, and mechanized labor (Gartman 1986*a*). This fragmented, alienated labor process transformed the aesthetics of automobiles. To eliminate skilled workers manufacturers had to replace the closely fitted, curving forms of handcrafted cars with the loosely jointed, harshly rectilinear shapes adapted to mass-production machines. The sharp angles, obtrusive gaps and seams, and rigid uniformity of cars like Ford's Model T bore direct testimony to the fragmented, alienated labor process that produced them. Alongside the handcrafted vehicles driven by the wealthy, these mass-produced cars symbolized the degraded class position of the lower classes who drove them, a heteronomous life dominated by the hurrying commands of supervisors and assembly lines. At this stage of the industry, Bourdieu's model of class-symbolizing products was valid. Cars marked class, and popular culture was filled with class jealousies and emulation revolving around the various makes.

The visible links of mass-produced vehicles to the alienated labor process were not socially problematic as long as the auto was mainly a utilitarian vehicle. But when it became the keystone in the new edifice of consumption that provided insulation from and compensation for the ills of the workplace, these aesthetic ties had to be severed. Workers in the newly degraded process of mass production mounted a counteroffensive against this form of class authority. In order to contain this revolt, manufacturers made concessions in the form least threatening to their overall power—wages. Blocked in their efforts to achieve self-determination at work, workers employed their higher wages to construct a small realm of freedom at home, buying products that superficially satisfied their displaced desires. But to serve as substitute satisfactions for needs denied at work, domestic products had to remove all the marks that linked them to this original site of displacement. People could not forget workplace degradation in homes filled with products that bore visual testimony to it, so they demanded products that concealed rather than revealed these relations. In order to meet the demands of this growing popular market of discretionary consumption, manufacturers began

in the mid-1920s to carefully reify their products, hiring industrial designers to hide the ugliness of factory relations behind beautiful, organic surfaces. These efforts were intensified by the class struggles of the 1930s, which made it even more imperative to obscure class-symbolizing product distinctions.

In the automobile industry, this reification of class relations took the form of a superficial "unified appearance" that sealed over the telltale traces of fragmented production. Beginning in the mid-twenties, the auto body expanded to cover the incongruous assemblage of parts until it formed a smoothly integral, all-encompassing shell by 1949. And the angles of the body gradually became less sharp, as gentle curvilinear forms reminiscent of nature replaced the harsh, rectilinear forms that spoke of the unbending discipline of the machine. By superficially adopting these integrated, organic forms, which had previously been the exclusive aesthetic preserve of craft-built luxury cars, manufacturers concealed the signs of mass production and eliminated the obvious aesthetic differences between autos that symbolized class.

This trend toward obscuring the class relations of alienated production did not mean, however, that automobiles became totally homogeneous. On the contrary, there was a proliferation of automobile styles and types aimed at appealing to the consumer's need for individuality that was repressed in the homogenized workplace. And these types were often arranged in product hierarchies, differentiated by price. But the makes in these hierarchies were variations on the same mass-produced foundation differentiated by superficial embellishments that justified price differences. This price hierarchy became positively correlated with the class hierarchy. But because all autos shared a reified design that obscured the marks and relations of mass production, the graded models did not testify to distinct class tastes or real class differences in power but to mere differences in income.

In products of material culture like the automobile, then, class struggle undermined the existence of distinctions symbolizing class position. But this mass reification is not equally extended to the realm of nonmaterial culture, where data reveal that art, music, and literature show aesthetic differences that symbolize and legitimate class. In this realm, the bourgeoisie maintains a class-distinctive culture that casts an aura of personal worthiness on its members. For at least two reasons, working-class struggle for greater consumption is oriented more to material commodities than to nonmaterial cultural practices and hence exerts a greater leveling impact on the former. First, the differences of material culture between classes are more visible. While the distinct bourgeois nonmaterial culture is often practiced in private arenas, differences in material commodities like autos and clothes are conspicuously visible in public places as con-

stant reminders of class gaps. Second, nonmaterial cultural pursuits require extensive training, either formal or informal, in skills of consumption, which is generally denied the working class.

So advanced capitalist societies possess both a mass material and class nonmaterial culture. And the two realms of culture working in unison do a much better job of legitimating and reproducing the class structure than either could separately. In leisure, people consume homogenized material products, which provide the cultural basis for rituals of class-obscuring solidarity. When people of different classes meet at leisure, they can talk the common language of consumerism and feel very much at one with each other. However, at the same time the dominant class distinguishes itself by cultivating a separate realm of nonmaterial culture, which provides the cultural basis for rituals of exclusion. Only the bourgeoisie can talk art, classical music, and literature, thus excluding and subordinating the workers they command at work in rituals testifying to superior knowledge and learning ability.

## CONCLUSION

Both Bourdieu's theory of class symbolization and the Frankfurt school's theory of mass reification validly describe a part of late capitalist culture. But neither grasps its totality because both fail to conceptualize the dynamic factor that mediates the relation of class to culture—class struggle. Because of Bourdieu's rather ahistorical view of class and its cultural legitimation, he does not fully conceptualize the cultural changes wrought by the transition to capitalism. Theorists of the Frankfurt school are more attuned to the dynamic of capitalist class relations and better understand the progressive reification of culture. But their neglect of the contingent, historical factors mediating the impact of class relations on culture leads them to ignore the limits of mass reification. The totality of late capitalist culture may be grasped only by conceptualizing culture as a historically grounded human praxis, an intervention in class struggle that may either reproduce or revolutionize existing class structures.

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