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# CULTURAL CAPITAL: ALLUSIONS, GAPS AND GLISSANDOS IN RECENT THEORETICAL DEVELOPMENTS\*

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*The concept of cultural capital has been increasingly used in American sociology to study the impact of cultural reproduction on social reproduction. However, much confusion surrounds this concept. In this essay, we disentangle Bourdieu and Passeron's original work on cultural capital, specifying the theoretical roles cultural capital plays in their model, and the various types of high status signals they are concerned with. We expand on their work by proposing a new definition of cultural capital which focuses on cultural and social exclusion. We note a number of theoretical ambiguities and gaps in the original model, as well as specific methodological problems. In the second section, we shift our attention to the American literature on cultural capital. We discuss its assumptions and compare it with the original work. We also propose a research agenda which focuses on social and cultural selection and decouples cultural capital from the French context in which it was originally conceived to take into consideration the distinctive features of American culture. This agenda consists in 1) assessing the relevance of the concept of legitimate culture in the U.S.; 2) documenting the distinctive American repertoire of high status cultural signals; and 3) analyzing how cultural capital is turned into profits in America.*

## INTRODUCTION

Culture has recently become an “in” topic in both American and European sociology. This trend is not an intellectual fad, as a large number of researchers are seriously engaged in dealing with the theoretically central issue of the interaction between culture and social structure. We are here concerned with scrutinizing a small segment of this growing field, the recent work on cultural capital. This concept—defined as high status cultural signals used in cultural and social selection—was first developed by Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron to analyze how culture and education contribute to social reproduction. Born in France, the concept of cultural capital has been imported to the U.S. and used to account for phenomena ranging from the political attitudes of the new middle class (Gouldner 1979; Lamont 1986; Martin and Szelenyi 1987), to the structure of the stratification system (Collins 1979), the reproduction of educational inequality (Apple

1982; Apple and Weis 1985; Carnoy 1982; Cookson and Persell 1985a; Giroux 1983), and the influence of family background on school experience, educational attainment, and marital selection (DiMaggio 1982; DiMaggio and Mohr 1985; Ganzeboom 1986; Lareau 1987).

As work dealing with cultural capital has grown, the concept has come to assume a large number of, at times, contradictory meanings. Cultural capital has been operationalized as knowledge of high culture (DiMaggio and Useem 1978) and educational attainment (Robinson and Garnier 1985). Others defined it as the curriculum of elite schools (Cookson and Persell 1985a), the symbolic mastery of “practices” (Martin and Szelenyi 1987), the capacity to perform tasks in culturally acceptable ways (Gouldner 1979), and participation in high culture events (DiMaggio and Mohr 1985). Still other researchers viewed cultural capital as “symbols . . . in accord with specific class interests” (Dubin 1986) and “the stock of ideas and concepts acquired from previous encounters” (Collins 1987). This proliferation of definitions, undoubtedly a sign of intellectual vitality—and possibly, of the fruitfulness of the concept—has created sheer confusion. We are now reaching a point where the concept could become obsolete, as those using it equate it with notions as different as human

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capital, elite culture, and high culture. An attempt at theoretical clarification is long overdue.

But clarifying the concept presumes that it can be put to good use. Why is cultural capital important? Is it something other than a faddish new term used to address the perennial status issues which have fascinated researchers from the days of Weber and Veblen on? We will argue that if the concept does not point to phenomena much different from those of concern to these traditional sociologists, its underlying theory provides a considerably more complex and far-reaching conceptual framework to deal with the phenomenon of cultural and social selection.

The concept of cultural capital is also important because it has improved our understanding of the process through which social stratification systems are maintained. As noted by Bielby (1981), Cicourel and Mehan (1984), and Knorr-Cetina and Cicourel (1981), while the effect of social origin on educational and occupational outcomes is among the most studied topics in the sociological literature, little progress has been made toward understanding *how* this relationship is reproduced. Bourdieu and Passeron's work (1979[1964]) received wide-spread attention at first because it proposed a novel view of the process by which social and cultural resources of family life shape academic success in a subtle and pervasive fashion. These authors' earlier work showed that apparently neutral academic standards are laden with specific cultural class resources acquired at home. Following Bernstein's (1964; 1977) observation that working class and middle class children are taught different language "codes" at home, Bourdieu and Passeron (1979[1964]) argued that other types of preferences, attitudes and behaviors, such as familiarity with high culture, are valued in school settings, while being more typical of the culture transmitted in "dominant classes" (i.e., upper-middle and middle class) families.

Bourdieu and Passeron's work also improved upon existing studies of social reproduction and mobility because their theory was structural, yet it left room for human agency. Indeed, they argued that individuals' social position and family background provide them with social and cultural resources which need to be actively "invested" to yield social

profits.<sup>1</sup> This contrasts with labor market studies which assume a preexisting occupational and organizational structure of "empty places" (Hodson and Kaufmann 1982).

This paper pursues several interrelated goals. First, it disentangles the original work on cultural capital, specifying the theoretical roles cultural capital plays in Bourdieu and Passeron's model, and the various types of high status signals the authors are concerned with. We expand on the original work by proposing a new definition of cultural capital which focuses on cultural and social exclusion. We note a number of theoretical ambiguities and gaps in the original model, as well as specific methodological problems. In the second section, we shift our attention to the American literature on cultural capital. We discuss its assumptions and compare it with the original work. We also propose a research agenda which decouples cultural capital from the French context in which it was originally conceived to take into consideration the distinctive features of American culture.

## BOURDIEU AND PASSERON ON CULTURAL CAPITAL

### 1. *The seminal question*

The concept of cultural capital was developed by Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron to analyze the impact of culture on the class system and on the relationship between action and social structure.<sup>2</sup> The authors were first

<sup>1</sup> In an analysis of marital strategies in a French village, Bourdieu (1976[1972]) draws an analogy with players in a card game. Players are dealt different cards (e.g. social and cultural capital), but the outcome is dependent on not only the cards (and the rules of the game) but the skills with which individuals play their cards. Depending on their "investment patterns" individuals can realize different amounts of social profits from relatively similar social and cultural resources.

<sup>2</sup> The first work mentioning the concept of cultural capital was an article titled "The School as a Conservative Force" (Bourdieu 1974[1966], p. 32), where a quickly abandoned concept of "national cultural capital" is proposed to describe national cultural supplies (see also Bourdieu and Schnapper 1966). The theoretical framework in which the concept of cultural capital is used had been developed in collaboration with Jean-Claude Passeron (*Inheritors* (1979[1964]); *Les étudiants et leurs études* [1964]), *Reproduction* (1977[1970]) and Monique de St-Martin (*Rapport Pédagogique et Communication* 1965). Bourdieu and Passeron parted after 1970.

concerned with “the contribution made by the educational system [and family socialization] to the reproduction of the structure of power relationships and symbolic relationships between classes, by contributing to the reproduction of the structure of distribution of cultural capital among these classes” (Bourdieu 1977a[1971], p. 487). The well-known argument goes as follows: schools are not socially neutral institutions but reflect the experiences of the “dominant class.” Children from this class enter school with key social and cultural cues, while working class and lower class students must acquire the knowledge and skills to negotiate their educational experience after they enter school. Although they can acquire the social, linguistic, and cultural competencies which characterize the upper-middle and middle class, they can never achieve the natural familiarity of those born to these classes and are academically penalized on this basis. Because differences in academic achievement are normally explained by differences in ability rather than by cultural resources transmitted by the family, social transmission of privileges is itself legitimized, for academic standards are not seen as handicapping lower class children.

Bourdieu and Passeron’s argument on social reproduction is in some respects similar to the arguments made by researchers who studied the discriminatory character of schools by looking at language interaction patterns (Heath 1982; 1983), counseling and placement (Cicourel and Kitsuse 1969), ability groupings (Rist 1970), the implementation of the curriculum (Anyon 1981), and authority relations in the classroom (Wilcox 1982). These studies have all pointed to the subtle and not so subtle ways that formally meritocratic institutions help to recreate systems of social stratification. However, rather than interpreting these patterns as examples of an individual’s or school’s discriminatory behavior, Bourdieu and Passeron saw these behaviors as institutionalized. Their analysis was more structural, and as such provided a sociologically more powerful framework for explaining the “taken-for-granted routines” of daily life.

## 2. *Disentangling the concept*

A close reading of Bourdieu and Passeron’s work on cultural capital suggests that the authors group under this concept a large number of types of cultural attitudes, preferences, behaviors, and goods, and that the concept performs different roles in their various writings. In *Inheritors* (Bourdieu and Passeron 1979[1964]), cultural capital consists of *informal academic standards* which are also a *class attributes* of the dominant class. These standards and attributes are: informal knowledge about the school, traditional humanist culture, linguistic competence and specific attitudes, or personal style (e.g., ease, naturalness, aloofness, creativity, distinction and “brilliance”). In *Reproduction* (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977[1970]), the concept retains its original definition as academic standards. However, the constitutive items are narrowed, and some are defined in more detail. Cultural capital is described as including only linguistic aptitude (grammar, accent, tone), previous academic culture, formal knowledge and general culture, as well as diplomas. Attitudes toward school, manners and personal style, and taste for high culture are now conceived of as class ethos rather than cultural capital. In *Distinction* (Bourdieu 1984[1979]), cultural capital plays a radically different theoretical role: it is *an indicator and a basis of class position*; cultural attitudes, preferences and behaviors are conceptualized as “tastes” which are being mobilized for *social selection*. Bourdieu shows that tastes vary with cultural and economic capital (i.e., with occupational differences in level of education and income). In other words, disaggregated dimensions of cultural capital (credentials on the one hand, and preferences and behaviors on the other) are the dependent and the independent variables (1984[1979], p. 81).<sup>3</sup> Finally, in “Les stratégies de reconversion” (Bourdieu, Boltanski, and St-Martin 1973, p. 93), cultural capital is a *power resource* (technical, scientific, economic or political expertise) facilitating access to organizational

Bourdieu has continued to develop his general theory, while Passeron has worked on a number of theoretical problems, including cultural reproduction (Passeron 1986).

<sup>3</sup> Elsewhere, Bourdieu (1974[1966], p. 327) argues that ideally, cultural capital should be measured with an index combining items such as the level of formal education of one’s parents and grandparents, the size of one’s place of origin and residence—which influence access to cultural events—and the frequency of one’s cultural activities.

positions (for a similar perspective, cf. the new class theorists Bazelon 1963; Bell 1973), and *simultaneously* an indicator for class positions.

Therefore, in Bourdieu's global theoretical framework, cultural capital is alternatively an informal academic standard, a class attribute, a basis for social selection, and a resource for power which is salient as an indicator/basis of class position. Subtle shifts across these analytical levels are found throughout the work. This polysemy makes for the richness of Bourdieu's writings, and is a standard of excellence in French academia (Lamont 1987a). However, the absence of explicit statements makes systematic comparison and assessment of the work extremely difficult.

Unfortunately, the forms of cultural capital enumerated by Bourdieu, which range from attitudes to preferences, behaviors and goods, cannot all perform the five aforementioned theoretical functions: for instance, while "previous academic culture" can be salient as an informal academic standard, it cannot constitute an indicator of class position, because it is not an essential class characteristic. Neither can it constitute a power resource (in the sense used by new class theorists), because it does not give access to positions in organizations. Also, level of education cannot be a signal of dominant class culture, because it is a continuous variable that applies to members of all classes.

Because of these incompatibilities between functions and forms of cultural capital, and because of the confusion with the original model, we need to simplify the latter and use the term cultural capital to refer to the performance of a narrower set of functions. The idea of cultural capital used as a *basis for exclusion* from jobs, resources, and high status groups is one of the most important and original dimensions of Bourdieu and Passeron's theory (cf., p. 158). For this reason, we propose to define cultural capital as *institutionalized, i.e., widely shared, high status cultural signals (attitudes, preferences, formal knowledge, behaviors, goods and credentials) used for social and cultural exclusion*, the former referring to exclusion from jobs and resources, and the latter, to exclusion from high status groups. This definition is encompassing as it also includes signals operating as informal academic standards, and those that are dominant class attributes,

for both types perform exclusivist functions. New terms need to be coined for the remaining functions of cultural capital with which we are not concerned here.<sup>4</sup>

Examples of cultural capital as high status cultural signals would be 1) thinking that knowing what a good wine is is important [attitude]; 2) knowing how to consume and evaluate wine [formal knowledge]; 3) liking not only "certified" good wines, but "osés" ones as well (i.e., having enough confidence in one's taste to define signals that are not wide-spread as legitimate and to be able to manipulate the code) [preference and attitude]; 4) having a sense of how conspicuous wine consumption should be to be tastefully done [behavior and attitude]; 5) having a wine cellar [possession of a good]. For those who don't share such signals, other more general examples might apply: owning a luxury car or a large house [possession of a good], being thin and healthy [preference and behavior], being at ease with abstract thinking [attitude], knowing how to send signals of one's competence [behavior], being a good citizen [attitude], knowing the appropriate range of topics of conversation in specific settings [behavior], having upper-middle class speech patterns [behavior], and having scientific expertise, and a well-rounded culture [formal knowledge].

For any of these signals to be considered a form of cultural capital, it needs to be defined as a high status cultural signal by a relatively large group of people: the institutionalized or shared quality of these signals make them salient as status markers. Contrary to Coleman and Rainwater (1978), Bourdieu is not concerned with how individuals gain status, but with the institutionalized structure of

<sup>4</sup> Bourdieu (1987[1979]) distinguishes three types of cultural capital: *embodied* (or incorporated) cultural capital (i.e., the legitimate cultural attitudes, preferences, and behaviors [which he calls practices] that are internalized during the socialization process), *objectified* cultural capital (i.e., the transmittable goods—books, computers, particle accelerators, paintings—that require embodied cultural capital to be appropriated), and *institutionalized* cultural capital (i.e., the degrees and diplomas which certify the value of embodied cultural capital items). Therefore "institutionalized cultural capital" could be used to refer to cultural capital performing the functions of power resource and indicator to class position: because it is certified, widely diffused across classes and quantifiable, it can be used as an indicator of class position. It can also refer to cultural capital used as a power resource, because credentials facilitate access to organizational positions.



unequally valued signals itself; therefore, again, he adopts a more structural and less individualistic approach to status attribution.

The authors often use the term “legitimate culture” interchangeably with cultural capital.<sup>5</sup> Yet, they don’t specify if by legitimate culture they mean signals which are largely believed to be “most valued” (i.e., prestigious) or if they refer to those that are “respectable” (i.e., good but not prestigious) (Bourdieu 1984[1979], p. 228). This is a significant distinction because prestigious signals would be salient for controlling access to high status positions, while “respectable” signals would act to exclude lower class members from middle class circle.<sup>6</sup>

It is important to note in this context that we believe that lower class high status cultural signals (e.g., being streetwise) perform within the lower class the same exclusivist function that the legitimate culture performs in the middle and the upper-middle class. However, for the purpose of clarity, the term cultural capital is not applied to these signals because they cannot be equated with the legitimate culture. A new concept needs to be coined for these signals; “marginal high status signal” is a potential candidate.

### 3. Methodological issue

The original theory presents problems of operationalization. First, each signal provides an indication of one’s global cultural capital (i.e., familiarity with the overall *répertoire* of

high status cultural signals). The researcher wanting to evaluate a person’s cultural capital would have to reconstruct the code prevailing in this person’s environment in its entirety—a most difficult task—before estimating the individual performance. Second, information on the *weight* or value of each signal in the code (e.g., wine vs sports “connoisseurship”) is necessary—an issue not mentioned by Bourdieu. Third, one has to identify the cut-off point between signals that are too commonly used to be effective in exclusion, or not used enough for people to recognize them as status signals. These problems are all related to the methodological issue of identifying what is cultural capital.

In *Distinction*, Bourdieu deals with this issue by using survey data to identify the lifestyles and preferences of stratified occupational groups—he is concerned with signals pertaining to cultural consumption (books, music, art, movies), vital consumption (clothes, food, furniture), ways of entertaining, personal qualities valued, and ethical preferences. After showing a correspondence *a la* Mannheim between class, and lifestyles and preferences—providing no information on the statistical significance of the relationship—Bourdieu suggests that a legitimate and a “dominated” culture exist because the value of cultural preferences and behaviors are defined relationally around structuring binary oppositions such as high/low, pure/impure, distinguished/vulgar, and aesthetic/useful (1984 [1979], p. 245). Cultural legitimacy is attributed to specific practices in contrast to other practices; the value of each element of a system being defined in relation to the other elements of this same system. The cultural preferences and attitudes of the dominant class make up the legitimate culture, while the cultural preferences of the “dominated class” make up the dominated culture.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> In *Reproduction* (1977[1970], p. 46), cultural capital is defined as cultural goods and values that are transmitted through class differentiated families and whose *value* as cultural capital varies with its *cultural distance* (dissimilarity?) from the *dominant cultural culture* promoted by dominant agencies of socialization. This suggests that various types of cultural capital could have different values, and that some are even “illegitimate,” or of low value. However, most of Bourdieu’s writings suggest that cultural capital refers only to highly valued signals.

<sup>6</sup> Bourdieu is not concerned with describing the mechanisms through which arbitrary practices and preferences become legitimate. Cultural producers are seen as central in this process (Bourdieu 1985b), but we don’t know how the legitimate culture makes its way from the cultural producers to the public—the work of Featherstone (1988) on the historical constitution of the cultural sphere provides interesting pointers. Goffman (1951, p. 31) called for empirical studies that would trace out the social career of particular status symbols. The “production-of-culture” approach provides leads concerning how to study groups of cultural producers (Becker 1982; Peterson 1979).

<sup>7</sup> Bourdieu (1984[1979], p. 316) defines classes by the volume and the proportion of economic and cultural capital that socio-professional groups have; the more capital groups have, the higher they are positioned on the vertical dimension of the stratification system, for they have more resources at their disposal to influence their environment. The proportion of economic and cultural capital individuals have differentiates them by determining their interests in favoring cultural or economic capital as standards of social positioning; for instance, intellectuals and professors attach more importance to culture as a standard in contrast to businessmen. The dominant class would be composed of engineers, senior executives, and industrial and commercial employers, on the one

This solution does not seem to be satisfying: in a large and highly differentiated society, the defining process is not a zero-sum one, as cultural practices are not all compared continuously and equally to one another, the situation posited by Bourdieu being as unlikely as ideal market conditions.<sup>8</sup> Consequently, the relational answer is empirically insufficient—although analytically appealing, as suggested by the success of structuralism.

This conclusion is supported by evidence showing that dominated groups have their own standards and sets of norms which can be relatively autonomous from the dominant ones (Grignon and Passeron 1985, Hebdige 1979, Horowitz 1983, Willis 1977); this research suggests that the value of cultural practices is not defined relationally. Bourdieu's theoretical framework implicitly presumes that lower class standards are not autonomous, and that dominated groups have been eliminated from the competition for the definition of the legitimate culture.

#### 4. Exclusion and power

Implicitly building on Weber's and Goffman's theories of status, Bourdieu argues that cultural capital is used by dominant groups to mark cultural distance and proximity, monopolize privileges, and exclude and recruit new occupants of high status positions (1984[1979], p. 31). Whereas Weber (1946; 1968) is more concerned with prestige and inter-group status boundaries (e.g., castes, ethnic groups), Bourdieu, like Douglas and Isherwood (1979), adopts a more Durkheimian approach, and focuses on the necessary *classificatory* (or marking) effects of cultural practices. To use Goffman's terminology, cultural capital is seen as an "interpersonal identifier of social ranking," which is only recognized as such by those who possess the legitimate culture; it is a basis for status boundaries as it signals

participation in high status groups and distance from cultural practices, preferences, and groups that are " 'common', 'easy', 'natural', and 'undemanding' " (Bourdieu 1984[1979], p. 31). It is used to exclude and unify people, not only lower status groups, but equals as well. Exclusion is not seen as typical of special "status" groups, such as the Chinese literati, but exists to various degrees throughout the social fabric.

It is worth noting that in contrast to Veblen who dealt with *conspicuous* consumption (i.e., "showing-off" which would normally be a conscious act), Bourdieu (1977b[1972]; 1988, p. 3) thinks that most signals are sent *unconsciously* because they are learned through family socialization, and incorporated as dispositions, or *habitus*, or are the unintended classificatory results of cultural codes. Also, cultural exclusion is conceived of as intrinsic to modern society, rather than as a phenomenon likely to disappear with the diffusion of capitalism and the decline of status groups.

We suggest that Bourdieu and Passeron build on Weber in an important way by introducing a more complex conception of the process of exclusion. They are concerned with four major forms of exclusion: self-elimination, overselection, relegation, and direct selection. In the case of *self-elimination*, individuals adjust their aspirations to their perceived chances of success (Bourdieu 1974[1966], p. 35). They also exclude themselves because they do not feel at ease in specific social settings where they are not familiar with specific cultural norms. In the case of *overselection*, individuals with less-valued cultural resources are subjected to the same type of selection as those who are culturally privileged and have to perform equally well despite their cultural handicap, which in fact means that they are asked to perform more than others (Bourdieu and Passeron 1979[1964], p. 14). In the case of *relegation*, individuals with less-valued cultural resources end up in less desirable positions and get less out of their educational investment. Their cultural disadvantage is manifested under the forms of "relay mechanisms such as early, often ill-informed decisions, forced choice, and lost time" (Bourdieu and Passeron 1979[1964], p. 14). These three forms can be distinguished from *direct* exclusion resulting from "elective affinities" based on similarities in taste (with which Weber was mostly concerned). Be-

hand, and of artists, intellectuals and cultural specialists, and occupational groups which have cultural authority (e.g., psychologists, professors, interior decorators, critics) on the other (Bourdieu 1984[1979], p. 232).

<sup>8</sup> Here we see how Bourdieu's model could have been influenced by its context of elaboration, i.e., the small and relatively culturally unified Parisian scene, where positions are more likely to be defined relationally than it is the case in a larger, highly regionally diversified society with no single cultural center, such as the U.S. (see Lemert 1981 on the conditions of intellectual production in Paris for instance).

cause this more sophisticated approach to indirect exclusion is one of the most original aspects of Bourdieu and Passeron's work, we decided to retain exclusion as the central dimension of the concept of cultural capital.

Bourdieu does not explicitly state the theory of power underlying his work.<sup>9</sup> However, it is clear that he conceives exclusion to be one of the most pervasive forms of power. It produces "dehumanization, frustration, disruption, anguish, revolt, humiliation, resentment, disgust, despair, alienation, apathy, fatalist resignation, dependency, and aggressiveness" (1961 [1958], p. 161); cf., also Sennett and Cobb 1973). The power exercised through cultural capital is not a power of influence over specific decisions (Dahl 1968), or over the setting of the political agenda (Bachrach and Baratz 1962). Rather, it is first and foremost a power to shape other peoples' lives through exclusion and symbolic imposition (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977[1970], p. 18). In particular, it is a power of legitimating the claim that specific cultural norms and practices are superior, and of institutionalizing these claims to regulate behavior and access to resources. The capacity of a class to make its particular preferences and practices seem natural and authoritative is the key to its control. These become standard through society while shrouded in a cloak of neutrality, and the educational system adopts them to evaluate students (Bourdieu 1974[1966], p. 349). Thereby, the "dominant class" exercises *symbolic violence*, i.e., "the power . . . to impose meanings . . . as legitimate by concealing the power relations which are the basis of its force" (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977[1970], p. 4; also Thompson 1984).

Another implicit theory of power present in Bourdieu's general theoretical apparatus is one which, similarly to the exchange theory of power, focuses on the dependency and maximalization of resources—however, in Bourdieu's work, individuals adjust their investments to their probability of success,

which explains why they do not all behave like *homines economici*.<sup>10</sup> Cultural capital is seen as one of several *resources* (along with social, economic and symbolic capital) in which individuals invest, and which can be converted into one another to maximize one's upward mobility (1985a, p. 724). It is mostly converted into symbolic capital, i.e., legitimacy and prestige, a point that conceptually differentiates cultural capital from human capital.<sup>11</sup> The market metaphor seems to us justified because the various types of capitals are rare and highly desirable resources, and are used as generalized medium of exchange; however, we believe that this metaphor is less suitable in societies where the cultural consensus is weak, and where the definition of high status cultural signals, and their yields, varies across groups.

We have argued that Bourdieu and Passeron provide a more structural approach to discrimination in school settings, cultural selection and status attribution by focusing on institutionalized signals. They also provide a more sophisticated conception of social exclusion than Weber does, as they point out various forms of indirect exclusion. Yet, even if Bourdieu's work is extremely rich and

<sup>10</sup> One of several differences between Bourdieu's work and the exchange theory of power is that the latter pays much attention to how dependence arises from individuals' emotional (or subjective) investment in resources (e.g., Emerson 1962). Bourdieu seems to assume that the control of resources alone triggers dependency; at least, he does not discuss how variations in need, availability, and emotional investment affects dependency relations and power.

<sup>11</sup> Bourdieu considers both the symbolic and the economic profits bestowed by cultural capital, while human capital theorists ignore symbolic profits. Also, human capital theorists neglect the structure of possible profits, which varies by social class and which, according to Bourdieu, explains differences in investment in cultural capital: "Economists might seem to deserve credit for explicitly raising the question of the relationship between the rates of profit on educational investment and on economic investment (and its evolution). But their measurement of the yield from scholastic investment takes account only of monetary investments and profits or those directly convertible into money, such as the cost of schooling and the case equivalent of time devoted to study; they are unable to explain the different proportions of their resources which different agents or different social class allocate to economic investment and cultural investment because they fail to take systematic account of the structure of the differential chances of profit which the various markets offer these agents or classes as a function of the volume and the composition of their assets." (1987[1979], pp. 243–44; see also Bourdieu, Boltanski and St-Martin 1973).

<sup>9</sup> Elsewhere, Bourdieu implicitly addresses the problem of power. In *Algeria* 60 (1979[1977], p. 51), he writes: "The degree of freedom conferred on each worker, the freedom to choose his job and his employer, the freedom to demand respect in work relationships, varies considerably according to socio-occupational category, income, and especially the degree of skill and level of education. Similarly, the field of possible [sic] tends to expand as one rises in the social hierarchy."



fruitful, many aspects of the framework remain undertheorized, and the framework presents methodological flaws and conceptual gaps. We have attempted to isolate some of the gaps pertaining to power for instance. We have also built on the original theory by disentangling the concept of cultural capital, and proposing a less encompassing definition which focuses on cultural and social exclusion. We now look at changes that the concept has undergone in being imported to the U.S.

## RECENT AMERICAN WORKS ON CULTURAL CAPITAL

The concept of cultural capital has spurred considerable theoretical interest in America, resulting in several empirical studies. Work has focused almost exclusively on educational institutions, the schooling of elites, and the relation between home and school.<sup>12</sup> A few examples provide a glimpse of the recent developments: in a 1982 study using survey data, DiMaggio (1982) found that levels of cultural capital influenced grades for high school students. In a later study, DiMaggio and Mohr (1985) found that cultural capital also influenced higher education attendance and completion as well as marital selection patterns. Studies of boarding schools examined the role of cultural capital in the curriculum (Cookson and Persell 1985a; 1985b; Persell and Cookson 1985). Lareau (1987; forthcoming) argued that differences in family life linked to social class (e.g., social networks, role segregation) become a form of cultural capital, structuring family-school relationships for first grade children. Dubin (1986) suggested that representations of blacks in popular culture are a form of cultural capital used in the imposition of symbolic violence. Among the studies not concerned with educational or social reproduction, Collins has drawn on the concept of cultural capital in his discussion of the modern stratification structure (1979), his theory of interaction ritual chains (1981a; 1985), and his analysis of creativity in intellectual careers (1987). Lamont (1986;

1987b) has explained variations in political attitudes within the new middle class by variations in the degree of dependence on profit-making and the utility for profit-making of workers' cultural capital.

Not all researchers have found empirical support for Bourdieu's model of cultural reproduction: Robinson and Garnier (1985) reported that Bourdieu greatly overstates the influence of education on class reproduction in France. They also noted that the influence is mediated in important ways by gender. Similarly, Blau (1986a; 1986b) found support for the independence of economic capital from cultural and academic capital in patterns of cultural tastes. Other analyzing patterns of cultural choices found that variables other than class were better predictors of preferences in cultural consumption in the U.S., notably education, age and gender (Greenberg and Frank 1983).

### 1. *Where has power gone?*

In general, American researchers have abstracted the concept of cultural capital from the micro-political framework in which it was originally embedded. From a tool for studying the process of class reproduction, the concept became a tool for examining the process of status attainment. For instance, DiMaggio and colleagues in their important work have examined the effect of cultural capital in determining students' grades, and in influencing educational attainment and marital selection (DiMaggio 1982; DiMaggio and Mohr 1985). The definition of cultural capital used in this research was narrower than Bourdieu's as it was not concerned with symbolic domination or with cultural exclusion in micro-settings.

Other American researchers have addressed the issue of symbolic domination: Gouldner (1979) and Martin and Szelenyi (1987) have done so at length. They defined symbolic domination within a Marxist perspective, focusing on the place of domination within the relations of production. Martin and Szelenyi understood cultural capital as theoretical knowledge, symbolic mastery or intellectual work. They focused on the relations of domination between theoretical mastery/practical mastery and intellectual/manual work. Gouldner (1979), on the other hand, defined cultural capital as education producing economic profit. He studied whether the associa-

<sup>12</sup> This section ignores an important literature on social and cultural reproduction (e.g., Anyon 1981; Arnot and Whitty 1982; Bowers 1980; Bullivant 1982; Connell et al. 1982; Mickelson 1987; Oakes 1985; Taylor 1984; Watkins 1984; and Willis 1981).

tion between higher income and education is due to the higher productivity of the educated, or to their acculturation into the middle class.

The American narrowing of the concept of cultural capital is not problematic if the distinctive features of this concept are preserved. As shown in the last section, the micro-political focus is one of the crucial dimensions of cultural capital, as illustrated by Bourdieu's complex analysis of cultural and social exclusion, a form of micro-politics "par excellence". It also constitutes one of the main differences between Bourdieu's contribution and Veblen's work on conspicuous consumption. Whereas Veblen also talks about status symbols and their "invidious" (i.e., relational) nature, the cultivation of aesthetic distance, the role of the family in transmitting culture, and the importance of time in "cultural accumulation," Bourdieu (1985a) significantly builds on Veblen's contribution—without acknowledging it—when he analyzes symbolic conflicts for the definition of standards of evaluation (cf., his analysis of fields in 1985a; 1985b). We believe that the micro-political dimension should be preserved in the American study of cultural capital by examining more closely cultural and social exclusion; the latter is a crucial topic for understanding cross-national differences in how stratification structures are reproduced and changed.

The relative absence of interest in the micro-political facet of cultural capital in the U.S. literature parallels the traditional resistance of American sociologists to deal with exclusion as a form of power relations; they tend to conceive it as an unintended consequences of action, and to understand power as involving coercion (Wrong 1979; for the opposite and, we believe, still marginal view, cf. Lukes 1974). This trait of the literature is likely to be related to the fact that Americans do have a less encompassing conception of power relations than the French do (on power relations in French society, cf., Crozier 1964; Shonfeld 1976).

Now that DiMaggio and others have been overall very successful in showing the effects of family background and cultural capital on marital, status and educational attainment, we need to step back and reflect on the categories of analysis used in this research. The goal here is to make the concept of cultural capital less bound to the French context in which it was developed, and more adequate for

analyzing American society. This requires considering a number of theoretical and empirical issues, and more specifically 1) the relevance of the concept of legitimate culture in the U.S.; 2) the distinctive American *répertoire* of high status cultural signals; and 3) how cultural capital is turned into profits in America.

## 2. *Is there cultural capital in the U.S.?*

Important features of American society, such as high social and geographical mobility, strong cultural regionalism, ethnic and racial diversity, political decentralization and relatively weak high culture traditions suggest that culture is not as highly class-differentiated in the U.S. as it is in France. Indeed, American research suggests that class culture are weakly defined in the U.S. (Davis 1982); that ethnic and racial minorities reinterpret mainstream culture into their own original culture (Horowitz 1983; Liebow 1967); that high culture is being debased by commercialization (Horowitz 1987); that the highly educated consume mass culture, but also have a wider range of cultural preferences which distinguishes them from other groups (DiMaggio and Mohr 1985; DiMaggio 1987; Hughes and Peterson 1983, Robinson and Garnier 1985). Does this mean that America has an undifferentiated mass culture where cultural exclusion is infrequent, and that high status signals are purely individually defined and not institutionalized? It is unlikely, especially given the important cultural influence of the mass media.

However, a consensus of high status cultural signals could very well be less stable in the U.S. than it is in France, for the public for various types of cultural goods changes rapidly, e.g., country music went from being rural music to working class music after WWII (Peterson and DiMaggio 1975; for an empirical assessment of the level of consensus in the U.S. cf. DiMaggio and Ostrower 1987; no comparative data is available at this point). Frequent cultural innovation, as well as transgressions between cultural genres and styles (e.g., Californian cuisine, wine-coolers, the Boston Pops) probably constantly redefine hierarchies of signals. Race, and to a lesser extent, ethnicity, would also have a negative effect on the cultural consensus. Consequently, symbolic boundaries between

“legitimate” and “illegitimate” cultures are likely to be weaker.

The permeability of symbolic boundaries—or the existence of a legitimate culture—can be identified by documenting struggles around these boundaries between members of life-style clusters, which is a most urgent task for evaluating the usefulness of the notion of cultural capital for studying American society. Boundaries exist only if they are “repeatedly tested by persons on the fringes of the group and repeatedly defended by persons chosen to represent the group’s inner morality.” (Erikson 1966, p. 23). Therefore, cultural *laissez-faire*, or infrequent direct cultural exclusion based on a random and variable set of criteria, would be indicators of an ill-defined and weakly differentiated legitimate culture.

We believe that the “class racism” (or cultural intolerance) described in *Distinction* is more frequent in France than, let’s say, in the American Midwest, which would reflect 1) the existence of a less strongly differentiated legitimate culture; and 2) a greater autonomy of lower class high status cultural signals from middle class ones. But this issue needs to be empirically explored.<sup>13</sup> The problem of stability of cultural boundaries goes unmentioned in Bourdieu’s work. This is one area in which researchers could expand on the French work in a theoretically fruitful way.

### 3. Documenting American forms of cultural capital

We have seen that, as research on cultural capital has spread, definitions of the concept have multiplied. On the whole, however, studies have followed Bourdieu and paid special attention to “high culture” in pointing out the items that make up the legitimate culture. Most notably, DiMaggio and colleagues operationalized cultural capital as knowledge of classical music and participation in the fine arts (DiMaggio 1982; DiMaggio and Useem 1978; 1982—cf., also

Cookson and Persell 1985a; 1985b). Although this choice has often been a wise choice given the data available<sup>14</sup>, no one has yet empirically tested if participation in high culture events is an adequate indicator of cultural capital in the U.S. Firsthand experience with American culture—especially outside the East Coast—could cast doubt on the centrality of high culture participation as a basis for social and cultural selection.

Documenting the socially and historically specific forms of American cultural capital is now an urgent empirical task. At this point, much of our knowledge concerning high status cultural signals is located in “how to” books which spell out in detail the proper symbols and behaviors that assist occupational success, including clothing, jewelry, conversation styles, gift giving, alcohol consumption, dinner party etiquette, leisure time activities, and community service. Biographies of upwardly mobile individuals which reveal how they changed their dress, speech, household furnishings, and dietary patterns to fit in their new *milieux* also provide valuable information scattered in bits and pieces.

In order to systematically document the American forms of cultural capital in America, one could identify clusters of people who share similar *répertoires* of institutionalized signals by interviewing managers, professionals and entrepreneurs on their preferences and lifestyles—the latter being seen as ideal by Americans (Coleman and Rainwater (1978).<sup>15</sup> The respective *weight* of various items in the legitimate culture—a topic unexplored by American and French researchers alike—

<sup>14</sup> DiMaggio (1982, p. 191) states: “While it would be preferable to ground these measures in observed cultures of dominant status groups, in the absence of such a rigorous data base, high cultural measures represent the best alternative for several reasons.” He also proposes (p. 199) that “An ideal data set for our purposes would contain measures of cultural capital grounded in research on adult elites in a single community; objective measures of grades, standardized by school; data on teachers’ evaluations of students’ characters and aptitudes; and observationally grounded measures of students’ interaction style, both linguistic and nonverbal.”

<sup>15</sup> This culture has been almost completely neglected by students of American culture who have focused on the upper class culture (Baltzell 1964; Domhoff 1974), the middle class at large (Bellah et al. 1985; Kanter 1977; Mills 1953; Varennes 1977), and the working class and the underclass cultures (Garson 1977; Liebow 1967; Rubin 1976; Sennett and Cobb 1973). It should be noted that Wuthnow (1987, chap. 3) offers interesting insights on how to study symbolic boundaries.

<sup>13</sup> One of the few researchers working on the problem of cross-national differences in the influence of cultural selection on the stratification system is Richard Münch (1988). Also, Ganzeboom (1986) found that cultural socialization affects status attainment in a similar way in the U.S., the Netherlands and Hungary, which suggests that cultural and social selection functions similarly in these three national settings.

should be analyzed while documenting how people evaluate status. This can be done by comparing the importance attached to various types of cultural preferences—e.g., knowledge of high culture in contrast with other types of signals, such as familiarity with sports, owning guns and horses, belonging to health clubs, churches, and country clubs, having environmental concerns, sending one's children to private schools, and belonging to ethnic or historic associations. This would allow identifying clusters of individuals who share specific tastes, and discovering which clusters are predominant (e.g., “pointy-headed high brow liberals on bicycle” vs “God-fearing materialist entrepreneurs”) in various types of occupations and regions.

The weight of items of legitimate culture can also be analyzed by looking at the importance attached to *purchasable* signals in contrast to *culturally acquired* ones. Firsthand cross-cultural experience suggests that in the U.S., in contrast to France, *access to goods* (e.g., having a wine cellar, or buying expensive biking or skiing equipment) is more important than *modalities of consumption* (i.e., the wine consumption examples cited below, manners, dressing code), or connoisseurship, which are likely to be less nuanced and elaborate; fewer valued signals are likely to be inexpensive (e.g., reading Sartre in contrast to buying “yuppy” paraphernalia). This trait might be becoming more pronounced, as exemplified by the recent rapid diffusion of the expensive yuppy culture, and the simultaneous decline of cultural literacy.

Based on studies of French images of American life, we can predict that American legitimate culture is less related to knowledge of the Western humanist culture, is more technically oriented (with an emphasis on scientific or computer information), and more materialistic than the French legitimate culture depicted in *Distinction* (Wylie and Henricquez 1982; on consumption in the U.S. cf., also Sobel 1983, Zablocki and Kanter 1976). Valued attitudes and personal styles are also likely to be different: rather than the aloofness, originality, non-profit orientation, brilliance, and off-handedness valued in the French context—according to Bourdieu (1984[1979])—some evidence suggests that aggressiveness, competence, entrepreneurship, self-reliance, self-directiveness, “problem-solving activism,” and adaptability

are desirable personal styles in the American context (Katchadourian and Boli 1985; cf. also Bellah et al. 1985; Kerckhoff 1972; Kohn and Schooler 1983; Varennes 1977). While Bellah et al. (1985) were concerned with some of these values, they did not systematically document the American *répertoire* of high status cultural signals, and were more interested in how people make sense of their lives and their self.

#### 4. Turning capital into profits

As noted earlier, one of the strengths of the concept of cultural capital is that it leaves room for individual biographies by taking into consideration variations in how individuals use their cultural capital. The day-to-day processes and micro-level interactions in which individuals activate their cultural capital to gain access to social settings or attain desired social results—i.e., the study of cultural reproduction in action—is an interesting topic still neglected by American and French researchers alike (besides Heath 1982).<sup>16</sup> These processes and interactions could be studied in employment and school settings:

1) Studies in stratification and social mobility are often quite vague about the cultural skills workers demonstrate in employment settings and their influence on their occupational prospects. In her study of managers, Kanter (1977) touches on related issues: she argues that the indeterminacy of managers' work fosters an organization emphasis on social homogeneity, that management relies on indicators of social conformity, and that the behavior of managers outside of the office, in evening get-togethers and weekend outings, contributes to managers' chances for occupational success. Some of these events require managers to demonstrate cultural competencies (e.g., playing golf, giving dinner parties) and signs of cultural membership. Other studies (Deal and Ken-

<sup>16</sup> This program would also produce a more sophisticated understanding of the link between macro structure and interaction. For discussions of the importance of linking the micro and micro levels of analysis see Alexander (1987); Collins (1981b; 1981c); Giddens (1984); and Knorr-Cetina and Cicourel (1981). For examples of studies of micro-level social interaction, particularly in schools, see Cazden et al. (1972); Erickson and Shultz (1982); Erickson and Mohatt (1982); Heath (1982; 1983); and Mehan et al. (1986).



nedy 1982; Packard 1962) also provide indications that workers' proficiency in cultural rituals can influence their occupational futures, but they don't provide a conceptual framework that would address these issues in a theoretically satisfying way. The concept of cultural capital could provide a sound theoretical framework to study this topic.

2) This line of research can also provide a conceptual framework for the increasing number of school ethnographies which show important class differences in school interaction. These ethnographies have produced impressive documentation of the routines of classroom interaction, but do not make linkages between these patterns and the larger social structure (Deyhle 1986; Erickson and Mohatt 1982; Erickson and Shultz 1982; Heath 1982; 1983; Wilcox 1982). Along with studies of language interaction, they can also offer a fruitful avenue for exploring the day-to-day processes and micro-level interactions in which individuals activate their cultural capital to gain access to social settings or attain desired social results. These are likely to differ considerably cross-nationally, especially given French and American differences in organizational and academic culture (for instance Clark 1978; Crozier 1964; Lammers and Hickson 1979; Laurent 1983; Rose 1985).

## CONCLUSION

This paper pursued several interrelated goals. It systematized Bourdieu and Passeron's work by specifying the theoretical roles cultural capital plays in their model, and the various types of high status signals the authors are concerned with. In the second section, we looked at the American literature on cultural capital to compare it with the original work, and again point out theoretical gaps and untested theoretical assumptions. We also described a research agenda to decouple the concept from the French context in which it has been developed.

Confusion, some of it creative, has dominated discussions of cultural capital. To solve this problem, we proposed to define cultural capital as widely shared, legitimate culture made up of high status cultural signals (attitudes, preferences, behaviors, and goods) used in direct or indirect social and cultural exclusion.

We differentiated Bourdieu's work from

others concerned with status attribution. We suggested that Bourdieu differs from Weber most importantly in that he provides a more sophisticated conception of exclusion in part, because he is concerned with indirect forms of exclusion as well. Bourdieu's theory differs from Veblen's in that he thinks that status signals are mostly sent unconsciously, via the habitus, or unintentionally, because of the classificatory effects of cultural codes.

Bourdieu and Passeron's work improves on others by providing a more structural theory of discrimination in school settings, and a more dynamic approach to social reproduction which leaves room for agency. It also takes a more structural view at status attribution as it looks at institutionalized signals. Simultaneously, the relational method of identification of cultural capital presents important operationalization problems, which result in contested conclusions concerning the subordinate nature of lower class culture. Furthermore, many aspects of the framework remain undertheorized, particularly concerning the theory of power underlying the work.

In order to build on the important available American work, and to make cultural capital less bound to the French context in which it was developed, we proposed to step back and 1) assess the relevance of cultural capital in the U.S.; 2) document the American *répertoire* of high status cultural signals; and 3) analyze how capital is turned into profits in American organizations and schools. This could be done by analyzing 1) conflicts around symbolic boundaries; 2) the weight of various items in the legitimate culture (e.g., high culture vs sport connoisseurship, purchasable vs non-purchasable signals); and 3) the day-to-day process and micro-level interactions where individuals activate their cultural capital to gain access to social settings or attain desired social results.

While Weber was mostly concerned with status groups, and Bourdieu, with differentiated class cultures and their relationship to the legitimate culture or cultural capital, we are reaching the conclusion that more attention should be given to the institutionalized *répertoire* of high status cultural signals and to conflicts around symbolic boundaries. Our program would avoid the pitfalls of the original framework, particularly the confusion concerning multiple functions of cultural capital, and the unsupported assumptions relative to the relational nature of the cultural

system and the lack of autonomy of dominated culture. It would also preserve some of the advantages of the original framework, by retaining Bourdieu and Passeron's sophisticated analysis of direct and indirect exclusion, which largely accounts for the original success of their theory.

Cultural capital can improve our understanding of the way in which social origin provides advantages in social selection. In particular, by focusing on the "investment" practices, it stands to yield a more active and dynamic model of social reality. Further work on cultural capital, which unravels cultural reproduction while highlighting individual strategies, stands to make an important contribution to research on culture, power, and social stratification.

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