

Class and Culture

An Interview with Philippe Coulangeon

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Thirty years ago, Pierre Bourdieu's *La Distinction (Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste)* laid the groundwork for a reintegration of cultural factors into our thinking about capital. Is this argument still valid today? To mark the publication of the collection that he has edited together with Julien Duval, *Trente ans après La Distinction de Pierre Bourdieu*, Philippe Coulangeon talks to us about the metamorphoses of distinction in a world defined by inequalities in wealth and by the mutations of cultural legitimacy.

Books and Ideas: Is *La Distinction* still applicable today?

Philippe Coulangeon: Thirty years after it was published, this book still offers quite a fundamental tool for the description, understanding and analysis of forms of social stratification and inequality, at least in French society. I say “at least”, because one of the interesting aspects of *La Distinction*'s legacy is the degree to which a certain number of the concepts and methods that it elaborates can be applied to other historical and national contexts. Bourdieu is offering us a framework for analysis that is much more flexible than is sometimes claimed.

What is very important in this book – and this is something which it seems to me has not always been very well understood – is that it offers a “relational analysis” of the social realm, to use its own terms. From this perspective, one way of discrediting what was written in 1979 has been to say: “Look! The kind of correspondences that Bourdieu established in the 1970s (based on data from the 1960s) between social positions and a certain number of factors (tastes, lifestyle etc.) don't work anymore today!” And indeed, if we carry out this kind of substantialist reading of term-by-term correspondences, we will find that a certain number of correspondences that were observed in 1979 no longer operate in this way. They do still operate, but they do not appear in the same way anymore. As far as I am concerned, I believe that this matrix is absolutely relevant to help us understand a certain number of things, even though the ways in which they appear have profoundly changed – hence the title *Les Métamorphoses (Metamorphoses)*.

Books and Ideas: How would you sum up the theory of distinction, and what metamorphoses has it undergone?

Philippe Coulangeon: *La Distinction* is one of the most widely read, or at least most widely cited, French-language social science text in the world; of Bourdieu's works, it is definitely the one that is cited the most. It is unique in that it is not just cited by authors who align themselves with Bourdieu or see themselves as working within his intellectual tradition. It is

also often cited as a kind of reference in relation to which some contemporary sociologists are trying to position themselves. In these terms, it is mainly cited within the somewhat restrictive field in which I myself locate a large part of my own research: the field of the sociology of taste and cultural practices. I believe that this is a very restrictive aspect of this book, and that it is of course far more ambitious than that.

One of its main teachings is showing the “kind of correspondences and homologies” – to use Bourdieu’s terminology – that can exist between the space of social positions and the space of lifestyles. In fact, it is interesting to read *La Distinction* today in the light of the current dominant theories of social class. On the international level, the sociology of social class is completely dominated by the conflict between the disciples of John Goldthorpe on the one hand, and neo-Marxists such as Erik Olin Wright on the other – with Goldthorpe’s position being much more powerful and better established at the international level than that of Erik Olin Wright. Bourdieu is not mentioned much in this debate, even though one of the things that is attractive about his book is precisely that it offers an alternative to this binary “Goldthorpe – Olin Wright” opposition (or, for the sake of expediency, “Weber – Marx”). This was clearly one of Bourdieu’s aims in *La Distinction*, which is something that French readers may be less aware of than English ones because it is stated very clearly in the preface to the English edition, where he explicitly talks about his ambition of overcoming the opposition established by Weber between class and status – the symbolic elements of materialisation and material elements. I believe that this is a major contribution of *La Distinction* to our thinking on this subject: it attempts to show the link that can exist between things that other theoretical approaches to stratification and inequality have tended to keep separate.

There is this well-known idea of a double structuration of double space, based on the one hand on the volume of capital (volume of resources) available to individuals and on the other on the composition of these resources, in particular with this equilibrium (balance or imbalance) between economic capital and cultural capital. It is probably at the level of the articulation of these two principles (the volume and the composition of capital) that there are changes to be observed. It is worth asking the question of whether this model can be transposed both to other historical contexts and to other national contexts. Meaning that one might very well imagine, without it invalidating Bourdieu’s concepts, that there might be situations in which the structuration of social space is more or less inflected by economic capital or by cultural capital. As far as French society is concerned, we do have a certain number of converging elements connected to all the research that has highlighted an explosion of economic inequality from the top of the distribution – which suggests that wealth and asset inequalities are probably more structuring today than they were in the 1970s.

Books and Ideas: Has legitimate culture been devalued?

Philippe Coulangeon: I wouldn’t necessarily put it that way. In a way, we can indeed identify some areas of social space – in particular in the upper classes – in which, to use Bourdieu’s terminology, “domination has less of a need to legitimate itself through culture” than it did twenty or thirty years ago. We might talk of there being a devaluation of legitimate culture in these terms; but if this is supposed to imply that cultural hierarchies have been completely eroded, then I am much less convinced.

It is always difficult to observe the evolution of indicators such as those of reading. This is a problem common to all uses of statistical indicators in the social sciences, but it seems particularly pronounced in the case of statistical indicators relating to culture. I mean that we

never know exactly what it is that we are measuring. When we are dealing with indicators of practices (such as indicators of reading practices), are we measuring the practices of individuals, or the degree to which they have internalised the norms of cultural legitimacy? This is a discussion I had recently with Olivier Donnat – who has been overseeing research into cultural practice at the Ministry of Culture for several years. He has published a certain number of findings recently regarding the development of reading; these show that reading is on the decline everywhere – including among categories that traditionally read the most. What we observe in particular, very clearly, is a decline of reading in the most highly educated categories. One hypothesis that Olivier Donnat has put forward, and which I find quite appealing, is that a portion of this observed decline – which is difficult to quantify – is related more to what I have termed “the decline in internalisation of the norms of legitimacy”. Meaning that when they are being surveyed, students may have less of a problem acknowledging that they are not reading in 2014 than they would have done in 1960, when this was such an essential element of the required attributes of a student that it was much more difficult to admit. Of course, I am not saying that this development can be reduced to such a dynamic, but I am convinced that this is part of the explanation, even if it does not account for the phenomenon as a whole. It is true that reading is on the decline, particularly so among populations that used to read the most; this phenomenon can be observed in other countries as well as in France. Wendy Griswold’s work in the United States shows that exactly the same type of development is underway there. One way of explaining part of this decline in reading would be to note that reading is now in competition with other activities.

Books and Ideas: What are other ways to think about cultural inequalities?

Philippe Coulangeon: There is indeed the post-modern discourse according to which we inhabit societies that are completely fluid, in which social and cultural identities are completely versatile and individuals shop around in a world of cultural repertoires that are all equally accessible and non-hierarchical. These ideas have been successful to a certain extent, but they have hardly any empirical basis. As soon as you take a closer look – whatever method you use – this is not what you observe. Rather, you see that cultural attitudes (cultural tastes and practices) are highly differentiated according to a certain number of social criteria, based in particular on the level of education, which remains the main predictor of standards of living. So we can discard this first criticism...

From the 1990s, what definitely did structure the debate surrounding the posterity of distinctions was the hypothesis of eclecticism, which various authors have put forward. We find it in the work of Olivier Donnat, whom I mentioned earlier, and who in 1994 published a book offering a retrospective analysis of a series of studies on cultural practices carried out since the beginning of the 1970s, and which was precisely entitled “*De l’exclusion à l’éclectisme*” (“From Exclusion to Eclecticism”). The book put forward the following idea: ultimately, what may have been structuring contemporary society was the opposition between those who were excluded from culture and those who had access to a wide range of repertoires – not all of them located within the highbrow realm. This position echoed theses that were overall very in vogue at the time in sociology. We recognise the model of included and excluded people in fields other than culture. This thesis of eclecticism was mainly developed in the United States, first in the wake of Paul DiMaggio’s work, and then above all in that of Richard Peterson, who formulated it as it was through the metaphor of the omnivore and the univore. In essence, Richard Peterson’s argument might be summed up as follows: what distinguishes social classes from each other is not so much the nature of the cultural repertoires they draw on, as the extent of the diversity of repertoires that are being drawn on. What distinguishes the upper classes from middle and lower classes is the fact that the upper

classes have access to a great diversity of repertoires that are not all located within the realm of highbrow culture. This has become, in the space of a few years, a sort of truism of the sociology of culture (which I myself have contributed to). There have been reams of articles and books published on this issue. There is a lot to say about how this phenomenon can be interpreted.

Finally, Bernard Lahire's position – which stands directly in Bourdieu's legacy – seems to me to be more interesting and fruitful. It involves saying that, in essence, the mechanisms that generate practices are connected to internalised dispositions, but that the internalisation of these dispositions is not final. These dispositions are affected by the diversity of the arenas of socialisation between which individuals circulate through social or matrimonial mobility. This is an interesting point, which, incidentally, may not have been studied enough. There is indeed a fairly strong phenomenon of homogamy in French society, but this does not always apply. A significant number of couples are not homogamous, and we might think that this has a non-negligible impact on the nature of tastes, of practices etc. I would say that essentially there are these three major types of criticism. I'm probably forgetting some...

As far as Peterson and the omnivore-univore metaphor is concerned, there is a huge amount of controversy. There are two levels of controversy. On the one hand, is it true? Are we really observing a rise in the eclecticism of the practices of socially and culturally privileged categories? And if this is indeed the case, how should we interpret it? I believe that the debate about the reality of eclecticism has already been resolved in part. It seems to me that there are after all a certain number of fairly robust indicators showing that practices and tastes are partly structured by an eclecticism gradient. We might note that this was already briefly referred to by Bourdieu in *La Distinction* – for him, the most subtle form of distinction was to borrow from repertoires that are not located within highbrow culture – an idea which Grignon and Passeron then somewhat developed in *Le Savant et le populaire*, with their image of a symbolic *droit du seigneur*. According to them, what allows a group to entrench its cultural domination is the privilege it has of borrowing things from other non-legitimate repertoires, with the reverse approach being far less easy to undertake.

As for the interpretation of the phenomenon, there is a huge amount to think about and this is where I have myself taken a stance. In the international sociological literature, this position regarding eclecticism and the omnivore is very widely interpreted as an indicator of cultural democratisation. Divisions have supposedly become somewhat evanescent, and this is supposedly the sign of a form of levelling out of cultural conditions. I am not completely convinced by this interpretation. I think that it hugely misunderstands the significance of these developments. On the contrary, I believe that, in a way, distinction through eclecticism is something quite formidable, because it is even more subtle than distinction through engagement with the consecrated culture. Indeed, an engagement with the consecrated culture may always be acquired through school. What is quite formidable about contemporary forms of cultural legitimacy is the fact that they probably do not operate through schools as much as they used to. From this perspective, they are certainly more difficult to master for those who have not inherited them. The hypothesis that I tried to put forward was that the hypothesis of social mobility in terms of cultural attitudes did indeed produce eclecticism. Inevitably, individuals who are socialised in diverse environments will develop heterogeneous and eclectic attitudes in adulthood. When we observe things, this is not exactly the case. I am being careful here, because for the moment I have only examined this in the field of music, and musical tastes are a bit special because they are particularly connected to class. But what I have observed is the opposite! In reality, class defectors (as Hoggart or Bourdieu referred to them) in studies of “the cultural practices of French people,” have more of a tendency to

develop attitudes of over-conformity with norms, and eclecticism tends to be more prevalent among their descendants.

Books and Ideas: What should be the aim of cultural policy?

Philippe Coulangeon: I have ended up becoming convinced that in terms of cultural policy as it is conducted in France, the obsession with democratisation is a trap. Just to be clear, I support the aim of this enterprise. It is a highly desirable and highly commendable objective. But if the legitimacy of cultural policy – the legitimacy of state interventionism in the cultural field – is only, or at least mainly legitimated by this objective, then I think that the legitimacy of state intervention risks being very undermined. This is a very real problem, which the Ministry of Culture is confronted with when budgetary decisions are made. Indeed, if the Ministry of Culture has to legitimate public spending in the light of performance indicators connected to the democratisation of access, I am a bit worried about how long cultural grants will last. Why am I saying this? Because I believe that this very commendable objective of democratising culture is to a large extent completely beyond the reach of the Ministry of Culture.

Books and Ideas: Why are you currently taking an interest in environmentalism?

Philippe Coulangeon: I started to take an interest in these questions in a somewhat convoluted manner, when I took a bit of a look at the genesis of *La Distinction* in Bourdieu's thinking, as well as at some of the books and texts that preceded it. In particular, one of the collective works he took part in, and which I became interested in, is *Le Partage des bénéfices*. This collective work brought together, at the end of the 1960s, economists, statisticians, and sociologists. It aimed to offer a multiplicity of perspectives on the way in which the profits from growth during the *trente glorieuses* (the post-war boom) had been shared between the different social groups. This book has become old-fashioned as a matter of course, since we are now living in a context that is no longer about sharing profits, that is no longer that of the years of growth of the post-war period. I thought to myself, at that time, that a certain number of questions about distribution were arising today not just in terms of the sharing of the yield, but perhaps also in terms of the sharing of the burden of externalities (to use the terminology favoured by economists). This is sort of where the connection lies. In the same way as I believe that class relations are not solely played out in the sphere of production but also in the symbolic and cultural sphere (this is one of Bourdieu's major contributions), there is probably something being played out in the reconfiguration of class relations around the environmental burden. In very concrete terms, how are environmental attitudes and practices socially differentiated? There is a sociologically interesting paradox to explore with regard to the carbon footprint of various social groups. For example, we observe that the most environmentally friendly social categories (the ones which carry out the largest number of small planet-friendly actions in opinion surveys) are also the categories that have the biggest environmental impact.

What I am interested in here is seeing how lifestyles are changing. Can we observe, here too, instances of emulation, imitation, diffusion and distinction in relation to these issues?

Books and Ideas: Are there some aspects that are neglected by *La Distinction*?

Philippe Coulangeon: There are probably a certain number of dimensions, differentiations and social stratifications of cultural attitudes that are only briefly or not at all dealt with in *La*

Distinction. I think this is indeed an observation that can be made without this radically calling into question the book as a whole. If we take the Anglo-Saxon triptych of “race, gender, class”, it is true that the dimensions of gender, of “ethno-racial identity” and of generations are not mentioned much in *La Distinction*. This can partly be explained by historical factors. In the 1960s, distinctions related to the presence on French soil of foreign-born populations did not have the same significance as they do today. What is less easy to explain is the absence of the generational dimension, since I think that even in the 1960s, if we take the data that Bourdieu was working with, I think that this generational structuration already existed. This topic has been examined since, and still deserves to be examined further. There is indeed a generational distinction between practices. We observe one thing in other contexts: when we replicate a certain number of analyses that are made in *La Distinction* – in particular by mobilising analyses of multiple correspondences – the structuring of the space of attitudes is quite different depending on the age group. Within a general space that is structured by principles very clearly similar to those identified by Bourdieu in *La Distinction*, we can identify sub-spaces (in particular in connection with younger generations), in which the structuring principles are not exactly the same. I think that the idea of a generational renewal that disrupts the lines along which space, tastes and attitudes are structured is a blind spot in this book. This may have fed into the idea of there being an inversion of domination. If we think of Dominique Pasquier’s book on *Cultures lycéennes* (“High School Cultures”), the subtitle of which was “la tyrannie de la majorité” (“the tyranny of the majority”), we again find the idea that among adolescents, domination could function the other way round. Meaning that there would be a form of tyranny of norms that are not those of legitimate culture, but rather those of mass culture.

I am not completely convinced by this, but one thing that is spectacular and true in the adolescent world is indeed the cohabitation of different prescribers of norms, of different cultural prescribers. This is probably a transformation that is very connected to the massification of teaching: as soon as you have age groups in which the majority of teenagers are going to high school, the inheritors are no longer the demographic majority within the school-going public. As a result, rivalries may arise between norms that did not exist in a context within which the demographics of the school-going public were different. So it is indeed the case that the educational institution no longer so clearly holds the monopoly of legitimate symbolic violence (to paraphrase both Bourdieu and Max Weber) as was the case forty or fifty years ago. We can observe situations in which norms are – at least apparently – inverted. Underpinning this is, I believe, something important concerning the issue of mass culture, which I think is too often brushed aside when people are dealing with questions pertaining to the sociology of culture. I still think that the saturation of public space with the firepower of the mass culture industry does produce effects – or at least, it is not absurd to think this. Behind the story of omnivores à la Peterson, there may simply be something along these lines going on. Even the most snobbish of snobs can hardly escape from the “tap water” of mass culture, in which case the observation of eclecticism may be somewhat trite. Yes, lovers of Château Margaux also drink tap water!

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