

“Taste” is arguably:

a reflection about the accumulation of symbolic goods

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Bourdieu, Pierre (2007).

Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste

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Abstract

In this expansive work, established through questionnaires in the period of 1963-1968, Bourdieu investigates the acquisition of symbolic capital and the implications of taste based on social class.

According the thought of Bourdieu, the social world functions simultaneously as a system of power relations and as a symbolic system in which minute distinctions of taste become the basis for social judgment. The different aesthetic choices people make are all distinctions – choices are made in opposition to those made by other classes. So, taste is not pure and no judgment of taste is innocent.

Written in 1979, *The Distinction* is a major contribution to current debates on the theory of culture and a challenge to the major theoretical schools in contemporary sociology.

Key words: culture, social relations, arts.

The sociologist Pierre Bourdieu – that was director of the School of High Studies in Social Sciences of Paris, director of the Actes Magazine of la Recherche en Sciences Sociales and professor of Sociology at the Collège de France – belongs to the roll of the great thinkers of century XX. His work, a lot of them published in Portuguese, - as, *Symbolic Power* (Bertrand Brazil, 1992); *The production of belief: contribution to an economy of symbolic goods* (Zouk Publishing company, 2001) and *The Social Structures of the Economy* (Piaget Institute, 2001) – Bourdieu always has aimed to disclose the dissimulation that is present in many mechanisms of domination that cross the social relations.

The most recent translation of his studies that was published in Brazil is *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (Edusp/Zouk Publishing company, 2007) - written originally in 1979 –, a synthesis of its inquiries in the 70's and considered by many authors as the central thought of its sociological career.

The book, divided in three parts, displays the analysis of an empirical research carried out by Bourdieu – a first phase, in 1963, studying a sample of 692 individuals (men and women) of three cities (Paris, Lille and a small city of the interior) and a concluded phase, in 1967/68. At the total, 1217 people had been interviewed about their different ways of appropriating culture.

For Bourdieu, there is an economy of cultural goods with a specific logic of appropriation that establishes the conditions in which the consumers of cultural goods, and their taste for them. So, in a determined moment, depending on the conditions of the constitution of the mode of appropriation that is considered legitimate, these goods can be or not be valued as works of art.

Since century XVII until our days, there are contradictory ideas exist about the concept of culture, about the legitimate relation with the culture and the works of art and, as consequence, on the conditions of acquisition of this culture. The research of Bourdieu points to the different hierarchies of acquisition of culture by the classes of the individuals. There is a social hierarchy - present in each one of the arts, in its sorts, schools or times - associated to the social hierarchy of the consumers.

The tastes would function as privileged marks of "class" and the love for arts is nothing but an abstraction that needs an act of previous knowledge, an operation that deciphers and decodes using a cognitive patrimony and a cultural ability. So, a work of art only makes sense and has its interest for those who own the code to understand it, and the territory of the "direction of the meaning" just can be covered for those who had undertaken properly the learning about the stylistic characteristics of this work of art.

For Bourdieu, "the 'eye' is a product of history reproduced by education (p.10) and the "pure" gaze is a historical invention linked to the emergence of an autonomous field of artistic production, that is, a field capable of imposing its own norms on both the production and the consumption of its products.

Bourdieu considers the individual process of acquisition of the cultural goods "an enchanted experience of culture" which implies forgetting the acquisition and unknowing the existence of instruments of appropriation.

The first part of the book, the Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste, argues about "The titles of cultural nobility". As it is impossible for anyone to leave behind the game of the culture, Bourdieu believes that it is only at the level of the field of positions that is possible to grasp both the generic interests associated with the fact of taking part in the game and the specific interests attached to the different positions, and, through this, the form and content of the self-positioning through which these interests are expressed.

So, the high cultured disposition and the cultural ability – learned through the nature of the consumed goods and the way of this consumption – can vary according to the objective structure of relations between the positions occupied by agents who compete for the legitimate forms of specific authority on their specific fields. And the forms of acquiring survive by the use of acquisitions in the social establishment of cultural nobility with titles that are given by the school and by the ancestry of individuals – a way to evaluate the antiquity of the access to the nobility. Assuming this premise, the tastes or revealed preferences are the practical affirmation of an inevitable difference –they are the distinctive expression of a privileged

position in the social space, which distinctive value is determined objectively in the relation with expressions produced from different conditions.

In the second part of “Distinction”, Bourdieu talks about “The economy of practices” very closely linked to the different possible positions in social space and, consequently, bound up with the systems of dispositions (habitus) characteristic of the different classes and class fractions.

Each social group, according to the conditions that characterize its position in the social structure, constitutes its specific system of disposals for action – habitus –, a set of acquired patterns of thought, behavior, and taste which is the result of internalization of culture or objective social structures constructed by the historical accumulation of experiences of success and failure.

Bourdieu believes that different conditions of existence produce different habitus, and the different practices produced by different habitus can be considered systematic configurations that work as life styles. Structure which organizes the practices and the perception, habitus is also the structure that organizes the perception of the social world and, consequently, works as a conservative force that keeps the division in social classes.

In this context, the taste – as propensity and aptitude for the appropriation (material and/or symbolic) of determined class of objects or practices – is the generating formula that finds its origin in the life style (unitary set of distinctive preferences that finds the same expressive intention in the specific logic of each one of the symbolic sub-spaces. However, in the contemporary society, the taste idea is so narrowly associated with the idea of freedom that it is difficult to conceive the paradoxes of the taste of necessity – transforming the practice into a direct product of the economic necessity. In fact, for Bourdieu, taste is a choice of destiny that leaves us, as only option, the taste for what is necessary.

The third part of the book covers the territory of the “Class tastes and life-styles” and explains the establishment of distinction, the several ways of appropriation of a work of art and the marks of the time between the ruling, the small bourgeois and the laboring classes.

The members of the different social classes, usually, are not distinguished according to degree they “recognize” the culture. In fact, they are distinguished according to degree “they know” the culture. The difference between the knowledge and the recognition is the beginning of the “cultural good will” that assumes different forms according to degree of familiarity that culture is assumed as legitimate. Bourdieu believes that one of the safest certifications of recognition of the legitimacy of this cultural good will lives in the propensity of most unprovided people in dissimulating its ignorance or indifference and, therefore, there is a deep submission - in language and culture substance - to the dominant values.

This cultural domination has great consequences in the politic sphere: “the most culturally legitimate” agents are taken as the most competent ones to think about the interests of the society - among the laborers, in the field research, was verified a high index of not-reply. Bourdieu observed the silence of those who judge themselves incompetent people to exert their

political rights. These people admit that politics is not of their business and, as considering themselves unprovided of real ways to exert it, they abdicate of the formal rights that, recognizably, belongs to them. Then, these people are condemned to delegate their voices to someone they judge most competent: the women for the men, the less instructed for the most instructed, those “who do not know how to speak” for those “that speak well”.

From this scenery, Bourdieu begins the conclusion his work assuring that the taste is an acquired disposal “to differentiate” and “to appreciate” or to establish or to mark differences for an operation of distinction that is not a distinct knowledge. The set of habitus, considered as an originary form of classification, is effective because it functions away from the level of conscience and the field of speech. So, the habitus schemas, which are the original types of classifications, owe their efficiency to the fact that they are out of voluntary control, placed beyond the grasp of consciousness - guiding the practices, dissimulating what could be named, erroneously, as “values” in the gestures most automatic. The cognitive structures used by the social agents to know the social world are incorporated by the social structures with forms of classification, mental structures, and symbolic forms. And, for being the product of an incorporation of the basic structures of a society, the principles of the division are common to the agents of this society. That fact becomes possible the production of a common world to all its members.

Thus, the social order is inscribed, gradually, by the conditionings associated to different conditions of existence, by all hierarchies in the origin of the social structure and by all classifications that exists in the language.

Therefore, for Bourdieu, nothing is more distant of an act of knowledge than the assignment of the word “taste” taken as the faculty of perceive flavors and the capacity to judge esthetic values. In this sense, taste is arguably, for sure.