



Alienated consumption, the commodification of taste and disabling professionalism*

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abstract

The theory that the contemporary self is largely constituted in the sphere of consumption has become something of an orthodoxy in recent years. Against this view, it is argued that there are many areas of consumption in which taste has become commodified as expertise. The creation of a market for this expertise depends on a 'disabling professionalism' (Illich, 1977) which undermines the individual's confidence in, and capacity for, independent judgment. This process is illustrated here by means of two vignettes – the first from art collection at the millionaire level and the second from interior decoration at the level of the suburban semi-detached. In both cases the outcome is an alienation of consumption in that the tastes expressed are not the clients' own. Consumption here loses its capacity to express the individual's species-being, becoming objectified instead as a medium of social stratification. The concept of alienation is here defended from its critics by redefining it as an impairment of the capacity for collective intentionality. Whereas consumption possesses a potential for collective intentionality, this is negated when it is objectified as an exchange value which Bourdieu calls 'cultural capital'. In *Distinction*, however, Bourdieu's account of cultural capital as deriving from the practices of an 'aristocracy of culture' is unconvincing. As an alternative it is suggested that cultural capital is the product of alliances between cultural producers, critics, educators and commercial interests. It is these agencies which employ the tactics of disabling professionalism in the commodification of taste, thereby producing the alienation of consumption.

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Preliminary discussion: Towards a retrieval of alienation

Since this paper will make recourse to a relatively unreconstructed notion of alienation, a few preliminary observations are in order. As Costas and Fleming (2009: 354) have recently observed, the idea of alienation has suffered rough treatment at the hands of postmodern and post-structuralist critics, principally on account of its associations with essentialism and economic determinism. They do not exaggerate. For DuGay (1996: 18) alienation is an 'objectivist fantasy' whilst for Baudrillard (1988: 79), 'the concept of alienation is useless, by dint of its association with the metaphysic of the subject of consciousness.' Baudrillard goes on to dismiss the entire notion of a critique of the commodity form and assert the rival doctrine of the consuming self in a particularly peremptory declaration:

The division of labour, the functional division of the terms of discourse, does not mystify people; it socializes them and informs their exchange according to a general abstract model. The very concept of the individual is the product of this general system of exchange. (1988: loc.cit.)

Both DuGay's and Baudrillard's versions of anti-essentialism appeal to a semiotically (or discursively) formed subject whose capacities to understand and internalize signs (or language), are simply assumed, either implicitly or on the basis of the 'always already' formula. Human children, however, are not 'always already' in possession of language. According to Chomsky (1995: 15), they learn

about a word *an hour* from ages two to eight, with lexical items typically acquired on a single exposure, in highly ambiguous circumstances, but understood in delicate and extraordinary complexity that goes vastly beyond what is recorded in the most comprehensive dictionary'. (italics added)

The process by which they learn, moreover, is better described as a re-creation of language than a rote-learning of it (Fromkin and Rodman, 1988: 375-379). This being the case, the capacities assumed in the discursively constituted subject cannot simply be ignored and nor, it follows, can they be reconciled with a thoroughgoing anti-essentialism.

Quite what capacities enable human beings to create and acquire language is a matter for debate within and between Chomskian, cognitive and Vygotskian linguistics (Chomsky, 1995; Dirven, Hawkins and Sandikcioglu, 2001; Daniels, 1996). However, a minimum definition of both language and semiosis is the assignment of publicly-recognised 'status functions' (non-natural significations) to physical phenomena (vocalizations, marks on paper, material possessions, leisure activities). Assignments of this kind presuppose a capacity for collective intentionality (Searle, 1995: Ch. 3; Tomasello, 2008). 'Intentionality' here is a

rather broader concept than ‘intention’ in its ordinary meaning, and one antecedent to it. To take an intentional attitude toward something is to regard it as relevant to oneself in some way. Collective intentionality is what makes it possible for human beings to share the perception of a four-legged flat-topped object as a table, to assign it the name ‘table’ as a means of stabilizing that shared perception and thence for a group of them to form the collective intention to eat a meal off it. The ‘collective’ of ‘collective intentionality’ also calls for comment. It is not simply a shared attitude; it is one which includes the idea that it is (or should be) shared. Searle (1995: 24) describes it as a ‘We intentionality’ which cannot be reduced to an ‘I intentionality’, though see Miller (2007) for a note of dissent.

Collective intentionalities do not imply a kind of telepathy. They have to be created, and in the ordinary way of things this is accomplished through language. This, however, cannot universally be the case since language itself depends on shared status functions. Tomasello (2008: 6) suggests that its basis is a non-conventional gesture of two basic kinds: indication and pantomime. All of this is the subject of current research and debate in the field of child development (Rakoczy, 2007). Whether or not Searle (1995: 24) will turn out to have been justified in describing collective intentionality as a ‘biological primitive’, it is certainly a form of ‘species being’ (Marx, 1977: 81), and might even coincide with it. On that basis, it is not unreasonable to regard a minimum concept of alienation as impairment of the capacity for collective intentionality and/or of the capacity to express it in actual intentions.

Such an interpretation of alienation is more familiar than it may first appear. For Lukács, (1967 [1923]: 6) the rationalization of the process of production encourages a ‘contemplative attitude’ on the part of the worker (i.e. one in which intentionality is absent). This passivity subsequently generalizes to a reification in which the social world takes on the appearance of a juggernaut impervious to human intervention (Giddens, 1991: 139). The political corollary of this attitude is a fatalism in which social injustice, where it is perceived at all, is seen as an unalterable facet of the human condition (Popitz et al., 1969: 294ff.). In the light of this view of alienation, the anti-essentialist objection would appear to turn on a presumption that ‘human nature’ must take the form of specific instincts. On this interpretation, alienation involves a suppression of behaviours which are taken to be intrinsic to human being or, conversely, an enforcement of some which are alien to it. Against these interpretations of alienation, Skempton (2010: 99-101) convincingly quotes Marx to the effect that what is denied in the alienated condition is the very openness of cultural possibility which the anti-essentialist asserts. Contrary to the straw-man stereotype of postmodernism,

Marx's view of human nature is that set out in the economic and philosophical manuscripts of 1844:

Industry is the actual, historical relationship of nature, The nature which develops in human history — the genesis of human society — is man's real nature; hence nature as it develops through industry, even though in an estranged form, is true anthropological nature. (Marx, 1884: 9)

As explicated by Mészáros (1970: 10) this is a view of human nature as formed in a three-way interaction with industry and nature. Alienation then appears as a consequence of the 'mediations' (ibid: 14) of these dialectics by the capitalist social relations of production. Instead of being shaped into use values by human industry, 'nature' is now formed into commodities by alienated labour. The consequence is that 'human nature' is confronted with, and shaped by, the products of its own industry in the fetishized form of consumer goods. Either way, whether or not it is subject to these alienating mediations, human nature is given historically rather than biologically.

What is unstated here is that Mészáros' argument also leads to a culturally relative conception of 'human nature'. Since there are as many histories as there are human cultures, it follows that there are also as many human natures - which is exactly the position of the anti-essentialist who nevertheless objects to the whole notion of alienation. That said, it needs to be re-asserted that for Mészáros' dialectics to occur at all, there must remain an essentialism at a deeper level. What Mészáros calls 'the specific human relation to "industry" (taken in its most general sense as "productive activity")' (Mészáros, 1970: 10) and Marx calls 'species being', *must* entail some capacity to act collectively upon nature.

Alienation and 'the economic'

The postmodern accusation that economic determinism is implicit in the concept of alienation presumably relates to Marx's deduction of the alienation of labour from its commodification. In the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* (Marx, 1977: 75-87), it is *because* labour power is exchanged against capital that both the form of labour and its product is controlled by the capitalist rather than the worker. And it is *because* that product circulates as a commodity that the relationship between the producers of the means of subsistence 'takes on the fantastic form of a relationship between things', an illusion which Marx calls 'commodity fetishism.' (Marx, 1977: 435 ff.). It is this common root in the commodity form which binds together the otherwise disparate psychological and sociological manifestations of alienation.

As well as a preference for a metaphysics of disconnection, the postmodern objection to the 'economic determinism' of what is clearly a broad-brush characterization of capitalist social dynamics may be based on a misunderstanding. Long before Bhaskar's Critical Realism lent currency to the ideas of causal powers and 'mechanisms' (Bhaskar, 1978), it was understood within Marxist theory that its propositions were to be understood as 'laws of motion' rather than empirical generalizations. Simply because many such laws operate in any concrete situation, not all of them known, any one of them applies as a tendency which is subject to a *ceteris paribus* clause. For this reason, an economic determination does not imply an economically determined outcome. To take a concrete example, the commodification of labour need not involve its alienation in the particular case of creative labour, because 'creatives' may be employed precisely in order to cater for a niche market for self-expression. In such cases, the authority of the employer is either held in abeyance or exercised in the form of a demand for that self-same self-expression. The sheer fragility of such arrangements, the ease with which the employer's authority can be re-asserted - perhaps in the form of a demand that 'self-expression' must take forms for which there is an established market - serves only to confirm the causal mechanism which connects the commodification of labour to its alienation.

In following Lukàcs on the diffusion of alienation from the sphere of production into that of consumption and thence into everyday life, it is important to retain a sense of its origins in political economy (Lefebvre, 2000: 94, Debord, 1994: 13). Failure to do so leads in a number of directions, all of which converge on a reification of the social order. The first is a tendency (manifested in popular usages of the term) to regard alienation as inherent in social life as such, to identify it with the frustrations involved in adjusting to the desires and expectations of others. The effect here is to reify alienation as integral to the human condition as in Sartre's existentialism (Gardner, 2009: 183). Another route to the same conclusion is by way of an a-social Stirnerite anarchism: to think of de-alienation in terms of divesting the 'I' of everything that is 'not I' (Stirner, 1907: 214). In fact this is a move (assuming it were possible) which would neatly collapse de-alienation into the very definition of alienation as it is proposed here, because the aim is to annul any capacity for collective intentionality.

Both of the foregoing misreadings of alienation are a consequence of thinking of it as a negation or frustration of the individual will rather than collective intentionality. Yet another route to the same conclusion is by way of a decontextualization in which the socio-psychological symptoms of alienation appear to call for therapeutic intervention rather than political action. This was the trajectory of Horkheimer and Adorno as it is outlined by Held (1980: 40ff.).

By the time of the 1947 publication of *Dialectic of enlightenment*, Adorno and Horkheimer's disillusion with the proletariat as an emancipatory potential had reached a point at which they felt it appropriate to express something close to contempt for the 'deceived masses' who 'insist on the very ideology which enslaves them' (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 133-4). Having thus eliminated the prospect of de-alienation at any public level, Adorno thought his way to the conclusion that the only prospect of preserving even the vision of a rational society lay in the possibility that individuals – like himself presumably – might escape the entrapments of 'identity thinking' through the practice of 'negative dialectics' (Adorno, 1973; Held, 1980: 73). This, he thought, would be facilitated by a therapeutic engagement with 'autonomous art', the quiddity of which would serve to disrupt the categories of a pervasive and politically compromised discourse. For Adorno this meant the atonalities of Arnold Schoenberg (Adorno, 1981: 147-72), the novels of Franz Kafka (ibid: 243ff) and the plays of Samuel Becket (Adorno, 1973: 85-87). A more poignant symbol of the alienated intellectual would be difficult to imagine.

Alienation vs. active consumption

For the theorist of 'active consumption' (De Certeau, 1984), the concept of alienation is an illusion brought about by a patronizing dismissal by intellectuals of the capacity of human beings to express themselves through their purchases. On this view, the manner in which commodities are produced is secondary. What matters is their semiosis, whether designed into them or projected upon them by consumers in the course of constructing 'consuming identities'¹ (Benwell and Stokoe, 2006: 168). In this scheme of things, the question of alienation does not arise, firstly because theorists of active consumption tend also to be theorists of the decentered subject (e.g. DuGay, 1996: 86-92) and secondly because consumption is taken to be the dominant source of identity in a world where work is no longer a 'central life interest'. When Dubin (1958) first announced this latter discovery (more plausible as a statement of alienation than a refutation of it), there was at least no pretense that work itself was in the process of disappearing. For Bauman, however, (1992: 46) 'the eviction of productive activities to a fast-shrinking segment of society' is a matter of fact so obvious that it needs no supporting argument and certainly no citation of the relevant statistics. Thus freed from the inconvenient drag of evidence, he tells us that:

¹ Benwell and Stokoe (2006) actually use the phrase 'commodified identities' but this has been replaced because it carries the surely unintended connotation that the identities in question are commercially traded.

the room from which work has been evicted has not remained vacant. Consumer freedom has moved in... It now takes over the crucial role of the link which fastens together the life-worlds of individual agents and the purposeful rationality of the system. (Bauman, 1992: 49)

The contradictions neatly encapsulated in his phrase 'consumer freedom geared to the consumer market' (Bauman, 1992: loc.cit.) tell us much about a theoretical stance for which Adorno's (admittedly excessive) fulminations against the cultural industries are representative of an outmoded 'legislative' stance on the part of the intellectual (Bauman, 1992: 19-20). Alienation, on this view, is simply out of date. In postmodernity, so runs the argument, all the selfhood that is on offer is aptly symbolized by the catwalks of high fashion whereon models emaciated to the point of androgyny are granted a borrowed simulacrum of gender only by grace of the designer. Against this critique of alienation, Lefebvre argues that the notion of active consumption is itself an ideology: one which 'further[s] the cause of class strategy' by insinuating that the concept of alienation is itself an antiquated product of ideological 'conspiracies' (Lefebvre, 2000: 56, 94).

In fact the critique of active consumption anticipated the doctrine itself by many decades. For Simmel (1990 [1907]) the expansion of consumer choice resulted in a growing disparity between the subjective and objective aspects of culture – that which can be grasped by the individual and that which is embodied in a society's artefacts and records. Anticipating recent discussions of domestic objects as repositories of personal association (Kron, 1983), Simmel, (1990 [1907]: 459-60) suggests that the displacement of these by 'impersonal objects' conditions people into accepting an 'anti-individualistic social order'. 'Cultural objects,' he continues, 'increasingly evolve into an interconnected enclosed world that has increasingly fewer points at which the subjective soul can interpose its will and feelings' (Simmel (1990 [1907]: 460). This is as clear a statement of alienation in the sphere of consumption as one could wish. Far from facilitating an expression (or construction) of the self, consumption in a monetarized economy involves a loss of spontaneity since it 'enforces the necessity of continuous mathematical questions in our daily transactions . . . reducing qualitative values to quantitative ones' (Simmel (1990 [1907]: 444). For both Lukàcs and Simmel, the commodity form as experienced by the consumer reflects back on the commodity form as experienced by the worker. Thus

the reduction of all objects for the gratification of human needs to commodities stamps its imprint on the whole consciousness of man; his qualities are no longer an organic part of his personality, they are things which he can 'own' or 'dispose of' like various objects in the external world. (Lukàcs, 1967: 14-15)

Simmel (1990 [1907]: 456) expresses the same idea.

As Fromm (1979: 29-30) has pointed out, this objectification of one's own capacities and proclivities is reflected in certain linguistic usages. Fromm's example is a passage in which Marx and Engels dissect the trope of possession by love. Instead of the active form in which a person is said to love, the state of loving is hypostasized as an alien force to which the individual is then subject. As a means of disclaiming both agency and responsibility, the image of possession by – or being in the grip of – powerful emotions is one of the 'metaphors we live by' (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980). As such, it clearly signifies an alienation from, and reification of, the emotion in question.

In the sphere of consumption the noun 'taste' has become the subject of a similar linguistic reification. In modern English the noun is ambiguous as between a sensation on the tongue and a preference. Significantly, the ambiguity does not extend to 'taste' as a verb. One can taste a bacon sandwich but not a painting of a bacon sandwich. The archaic active sense in which the verb 'taste' can mean 'experience a sample of' has been lost. An attempt to revive it nowadays would probably be understood as a metaphorical reference to taste-with-the-tongue. Along with its transition from verb to noun, 'taste' as preference has become taste as possession (which was Fromm's point). One speaks of a person as *having* taste. If one wants to use the word to speak of the act of aesthetic judgment, one must employ some such circumlocution as the 'exercise' of taste, or its 'expression'. Taste in action must be spoken of as if it were a kind of implement employed by the person whose taste it is. Thus modern English speaks of consumption in a manner which exactly parallels Lukàcs' observations on the alienation of human capacities which follows from the commodification of labour. The theorist who has done more than any other to conceptualize taste as a kind of possession, however, is Pierre Bourdieu, more specifically in his concept of cultural capital. Since this assertion may strike some as controversial, it needs elaboration.

Bourdieu on consumption: Cultural capital and alienation

As applied to the consumption of cultural artefacts (Bourdieu, 1984), Bourdieu's economy of practices (1990:122ff.) presupposes both a commercialization of taste and an alienation of consumption. What it lacks, at least as a theorization of cultural stratification at the level of an entire society, is a satisfactory account of the conditions under which taste can acquire a value (become cultural capital). According to Bourdieu, cultural capital is formed by an 'aristocracy of taste [who] only have to be what they are because the value of their practices derive from the value of those who practice them' (1984: 23-4). Against this, it will be argued that

cultural capital is formed in (competing) discourses of cultural inequality promulgated by alliances of cultural producers, critics and commercial interests.

For Bourdieu (1984) taste is commodified in the sense that it acquires an exchange value which he calls 'cultural capital'. By definition, the realization of this exchange value in quasi-commercial transactions constitutes alienation in the sense of a sale, but it is also an alienation in a number of existential senses. To the extent that cultural transactions are conscious, they require the individual to objectify their own relationships to cultural artefacts in ways which exactly parallel the objectifications of capacities which attend the commodification of labour. At the extreme, cultural consumption may be entirely driven by its public meaning (its exchange value), in which case alienation follows from the suppression and substitution of the dispositions native to the *habitus*. Nor is there an escape from alienation to be found in the privatised contemplation of 'autonomous' artworks (Adorno, 1973). In testifying to the refined sensibilities needed to appreciate them, the artefacts of 'high' culture have acquired a semiosis of inequality (Bourdieu, 1984: 31), an innocence of which is not to be recovered simply by wishing it were so.

In terms of the definition of alienation from species-being which was suggested earlier, the instrumentalization of taste as a signifier of cultural ascendancy entails a negation of collective intentionality. Cultural consumption as collective intentionality implies that it takes the form of participation in a community of appreciation. On the other hand, cultural consumption can only become cultural capital to the extent that what is consumed cannot be consumed by others (Bourdieu, 1984: 56). As Tolstoy sourly remarked, '[Beethoven's] 9th Symphony does not unite all mankind, but only a small group of it, which it separates from the rest' (c.f. Poggioli, 1968, p. 91-2).

The difference between intention and intentionality is important to the understanding of this point. Alienation as a negation of collective intentionality does not mean that it is only a possibility when cultural artefacts are the subjects of concrete intentions. In the Kantian terms which inflect Bourdieu's depiction of legitimate culture (1984: 41-53), the appreciation of a work of art is a form of intentionality which disavows actual intention. It is possible for such an intentionality to be collective where it consists of a common act of disinterested contemplation. For Bourdieu (1984: 53-4), this attitude is exclusionary in itself, since he believed it to be foreign to the *habitus* of those social strata which are subject to the stresses of necessity. However this may be, it is precisely this possibility of a common act of appreciation which is denied when cultural consumption is instrumentalized as cultural capital.

The formation of cultural capital

Notwithstanding its success in clarifying the manner in which cultural consumption can become detached from the *habitus* of the consumer, Bourdieu's sociology of cultural stratification lacks a satisfactory account of the formation of cultural capital. Attention to this entails a recognition of the role of cultural criticism in establishing the ascendancy of 'legitimate' culture and hence its ability to function as a form of capital. Various agencies participate in this work of criticism: educationalists, freelance critics and cultural producers themselves. Whatever their social location, however, and whatever disagreements may arise between them, these agencies share the common aim of attempting to define their own version of 'legitimate culture', as Bourdieu calls it (1984: 23, 53 etc.). At the apex of these definitions there stand those works which, in the words of Mathew Arnold, comprise 'the best that has been thought and said' (1999 [1869]: viii). Cultural capital consists in a connoisseur's appreciation of this legitimate culture, as manifested in a familiarity with its homologues, its internal vectors of influence and most of all in that confident familiarity which insists on superposing individual eccentricities onto conventional tastes.

For Mathew Arnold, as for Kant, the aforesaid 'best' stood in contrast to the 'barbarism' of popular taste (Bourdieu, 1984: 41), and it is a necessary condition of the formation of cultural capital 'that cultured people can believe in barbarism and persuade the barbarians of their own barbarity' (Bourdieu and Darbel, 1992: 179). It is this indispensable element of persuasion which connects cultural capital with what Ivan Illich called 'disabling professionalism' (1977). If people are to be induced to defer to tastes which they do not share (Bourdieu, 1984: 318), their relationship with their own tastes must, in some sense, be disabled. Through the agencies of cultural criticism, 'lower' tastes need to be constructed as objects of embarrassment, concealment and dissimulation. Even the critical formation of the cultivated person must involve such disablements. If the standards of legitimate culture are to be internalized, any contact with 'lower' pleasures must be the subject of a kind of aversion therapy, a sense that one is 'letting oneself down' which eventually kills off any enjoyment which these indulgences might otherwise have offered. Either that or 'lower' culture becomes a conditional pleasure, one to be enjoyed with a spirit of irony or under the temporary indulgence of 'the carnivalesque' (Bakhtin, 1968).

So it comes about that the critical discourses of legitimate culture routinely depict it as a defensive redoubt against the degradations of what the once-influential literary critic F.R. Leavis called 'Technologico-Benthamite civilization' (1930). Besides Leavis himself, prominent examples include his pupil Richard Hoggart (1957) on popular fiction and Theodor Adorno (1981) on Jazz. The

tactics are those of the self-fulfilling prophecy. Our commentators spit in the soup, so to speak, in order to demonstrate that it is unwholesome. Not infrequently this moral philosophy of cultural consumption is integral to the actual artworks themselves. In *Sweeney Agonistes* and section 3 of *The Waste Land* (for example), T.S. Eliot evokes the degradations of mass culture for a reader who is imagined as standing above that degradation (and alongside the poet, naturally). Literary culture and the discourses which celebrate its superiority are not two separate entities.

Bourdieu and Darbel (1992: 178) recognise the crucial role of critical discourses in the formation of the connoisseur, albeit with the minor qualification that they locate them wholly within the sphere of education. Though cultural education also figures in Bourdieu's earlier (1984) account of an 'aristocracy of culture' (1984: 11 ff.), it plays the relatively subordinate role of rounding-off and giving specific form to a cultural connoisseurship which has already been acquired during the formation of the *habitus* itself:

'Total, early, imperceptible learning, performed within the family from the earliest days of life and extended by a scholastic learning which presupposes and completes it ... confers the self-certainty which accompanies the certainty of possessing cultural legitimacy'. (1984: 66)

This view of the matter vastly overstates the cultural autonomy of the family and the continuity with it of subsequent education. For if the family is to be the socializing agent of legitimate culture, the significant others within it must first have assimilated its critical discourses and acquired a familiarity with its iconic works. And if education is to add any value at all for the aspirant connoisseur, it must offer some addenda to, and variations from, what has already been acquired.

Bourdieu's idea of an aristocracy of culture plays a pivotal role in his account of cultural stratification, but it is a problematic one. Besides being difficult to locate on his three-tier map of social stratification (1984: Chs. 5-7) it is an 'aristocracy' which is simultaneously required to embody the pattern of cultural consumption which defines legitimate culture *and* serve as the source of its prestige (1984: 23-4). For this to work as a non-circular account of the formation of cultural capital, the aristocracy of culture needs also to be an aristocracy of something other than culture, and it is hard to see what that might be. It cannot be monetary capital since Bourdieu believes that there is an inverse relationship between cultural and economic capital (1984: 115, 120). The only other possibility is that it is located at the dominated pole of the dominant class, which, so Bourdieu informs us, consists of cultural producers and teachers in higher education (1984: 262, 288). These, however, are not so much the consumers of legitimate culture as its

producers, respectively of its artefacts and of the critical ‘placement’ of these in the canon which defines legitimate culture. Whilst educators and producers might, at a stretch, be described as some sort of ‘aristocracy of culture’, it would be in a sense very different from Bourdieu’s. One has only to visit the appropriate department of any University to encounter backgrounds very different from Bourdieu’s account of painless induction into a life of cultivated Epicureanism, not to mention a vigorous repudiation of the ‘ideology of natural taste’ which is supposed to go with it (1984: 68). The inconvenient fact is that the authority of a critical discourse cannot simply be read off the social stratum from which it originates.

Nor is there as neat a fit between a ‘distance from practical urgencies’ (1984: 53-4) and the ethos of legitimate culture as Bourdieu suggests. To take one of many examples, neither the suicidal anguish of Sylvia Plath’s late poetry (1965) nor its critical celebration in Al Alvarez’ (1974) promotion of a ‘poetry of extremity’ fit easily into Bourdieu’s ‘systematic refusal of the human’ (1984: 32) – unless, that is, legitimate culture is to consist of a forensic picking-over of other people’s sufferings. The symbiosis between Plath’s poetry and Alvarez’ promotion of it suggests an alternative to Bourdieu’s model of a legitimate culture which derives its prestige from endorsement by a quasi-hereditary cultural élite. Working in concert, cultural producers, critics, educationalists (and commercial dealers in the case of the visual arts – White and White, 1993) seek to establish the consumption of legitimate culture as a kind of expertise - something which needs to be taught or dispensed to its clientele in the form of guidance. The establishment of this expertise as a basis for promoting particular artworks to the status of legitimate culture is a subtle matter since it depends on a negotiation of what might be called the ‘paradox of criticism’: that the authority of critical judgments depends on the reputation of the critic, whilst critical reputations can only be established on the basis of judgments whose ‘validity’ can be established only by their wider acceptance and in retrospect. Bootstrapping a way out of this impasse depends on the critic’s ability to create the illusion that they speak for legitimate culture itself, an illusion which ceases to be one, once it is sufficiently believed.

A note on the limits of cultural capital

Though the concept of cultural capital employed in *Distinction* (Bourdieu, 1984) is instructive on the ways in which consumption can become alienated, the connection between alienated consumption and commercialized taste extends to fields in which the concept of legitimate culture is simply irrelevant. A problem with *Distinction* is that it takes legitimate culture at its own valuation, as the

universal and dominant principle of stratification in the field of cultural practice. A single form of cultural capital, however, can only form a society-wide principle of stratification to the extent that it is universally recognized as a currency. Aware of this, Bourdieu (1984: 318) argues that the 'acknowledgement' of legitimate culture extends to those social strata who neither possess it nor aspire to it. The problem is that he presents virtually no evidence that such strata exist. He presents no data from the questionnaire which might have shed light on this question (ibid.: 316) whilst the unease of working class people in art galleries (Bourdieu and Darbel, 1991: 53) is scarcely evidence of a deference which is durably sedimented within the habitus and would be evident in other circumstances. What is lacking in *Distinction* (although present elsewhere in his work) is a recognition that in any complex society there are many forms of cultural capital (local currencies) and that 'legitimate culture' is just one of them - dominant in its own estimation, perhaps, but as much could be said of many others.

Disabling professionalism and the commercialization of taste: Two case studies

The case studies which follow illustrate the subtle presentations of self by means of which individuals represent themselves as authorities on matters cultural. In their very resistance to formal analysis they exemplify the importance of a 'feel for the game' which Bourdieu rightly stresses in his conceptual apparatus of field, competition and capital (Bourdieu, 1990: 66). They also illustrate the characteristic manoeuvre of disabling professionalism: the creation of a market for 'expert' advice by undermining the clients' trust in their own judgment (Illich, 1977). Autonomous judgment is replaced by that of an authoritative other, a condition which has something in common with the 'transference' of psychotherapy except that the commercialization of taste depends on its permanence. In that respect the following illustrations of taste-making in action could also be regarded as episodes in the social production of alienation.

Case 1: Mr Hearst meets Mr Duveen

Fromm's 'having' mode of existence (1979) may be at its most explicit in the collecting of art. Even where the collector is a connoisseur, it is an activity in which the pleasures of contemplation are interwoven with the urge to possess. Where, as in the vignette which follows, the collector is largely insensitive to the qualities of the work (Saarinen, 1959: 75), acquisition is at its closest to an abstract compulsion. Recognising this, Saarinen, (ibid.: xx) observes of the

millionaire American collectors, 'they were not only possessors: they were also possessed'.

In the following scene, the commodification of taste appears in the person of the art dealer. In this case it is Joseph Duveen, purveyor of renaissance masterpieces to the millionaire collectors of U.S. capitalism in its entrepreneurial phase. The compulsive collector, and hence the subject of Duveen's ministrations, is William Randolph Hearst, the ruthless newspaper tycoon said to have inspired Orson Welles' *Citizen Kane*. Participant observation is by Mrs Millicent Hearst, a former chorus-person who married the forty-year-old Hearst at the age of twenty-one, bore him five children and was deserted by him sixteen years later. The account is from a biography of Duveen by the American humorist and playwright Samuel Behrman (1952: 65):

Her own apartment was 'full of stuff' – antique furniture, paintings, sculptures, tapestries. The *clou* of the collection, her husband's pride, was two Rosselino (or allegedly Rosselino) bas-reliefs of angels. Duveen moved through the clutter of antiques, tapestries and statuary with the air of a man who has plenty of thoughts but is too well-bred to voice them. Finally the increasingly despondent host stood him before the two angels. Duveen made a barely audible remark that cast doubt on their legitimacy then left. There was a sad interval after his departure. Hearst was like a college boy who, after cramming hard for an exam, has the terrible feeling that he's flunked it. He was suddenly seized by a devastating doubt about everything he had. He shouted despairingly to Mrs Hearst, 'If those angels aren't right, then nothing is right!'

By means of such exquisitely calculated facework Duveen succeeded in making himself indispensable to the American millionaire art collectors of the early 20th Century. The first move was to undermine any confidence the client might have had in their own judgment, and *inter alia* in any previous advice they might have taken. The second was to substitute faith in his own guidance. In this respect Duveen enjoyed the competitive advantage of a clandestine financial arrangement with Bernard Berenson, as a result of which Berenson, reckoned at the time to be the world's leading authority on Renaissance art, could be relied upon to corroborate Duveen's attributions (Simpson, 1986).

From the beginning, Duveen felt that his intellectual mission was twofold – to teach millionaire American collectors what the great works of art were, and to teach them that they could get those works of art only through him. (Behrman, 1952: 19)

Through this business of catering to the tastes which he had himself created, Duveen became a distinguished as well as a wealthy man. Knighted in 1919, he was made Baronet in 1927 and Baron in 1933. He died in 1939, ennobled as Lord Duveen of Millbank, the same year in which the Duveen gallery of the British

Museum was completed. In recognition of his services to art – of which the foregoing is not unrepresentative – there is also a gallery named for Duveen at the Tate Britain. Hearst meanwhile went on to fill five large mansions with his high-priced jumble.

Whilst there were genuine connoisseurs amongst the wealthy American collectors, notably the New York Lawyer, John Quinn (Fitzgerald, 1996: 112-4), cases such as Hearst's raise the question of why so many successful entrepreneurs should have chosen art as a medium of conspicuous consumption, particularly since this involved exposing themselves to the predations of the art dealer. There are a number of possible explanations. One is competitive emulation. It is not unreasonable to attribute a competitive quasi-reflex to the entrepreneurial habitus. Hearst, for example, acquired 30 newspapers in the course of his career. Nor is it unreasonable to suppose that the urge to dominate of which this speaks would extend to whatever medium of display was chosen by other tycoons. Competition between wealthy collectors was a notable feature of the American art market of the period, as is attested by tales of rival collectors seeking to outmanoeuvre one another in pursuit of particular works (Saarinen, 1959: 95, 147).

But emulation alone cannot account for a practice. There has to be a reason why there is something to emulate in the first place. Behrman's answer is that the collecting of art provided a means of laundering the entrepreneurial CV. In support of this interpretation, he cites the example of Henry Clay Frick. As chairman of the Carnegie steel empire, Frick had been responsible for a notorious lockout during which a number of his employees were shot dead by Pinkerton detectives. Thanks to his purchases from Duveen, Behrman argues (1952: 163), Frick was remembered quite differently thirty years later:

the article on Frick in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* runs to twenty-three lines. Ten are devoted to his career as an industrialist, and thirteen to his collecting of art. In these thirteen lines, he mingles freely with Titian and Vermeer, with El Greco and Goya, with Gainsborough and Velasquez. Steel strikes and Pinkerton Guards vanish and he basks in another, more felicitous aura.

This is not entirely convincing: in what regime of gullibility can Frick be said to 'mingle' with Titian et al? At the very most, he can only have hoped that the manner in which his fortune was spent would erase the memory of how it was obtained. As an alternative – or supplementary - explanation, it might be suggested that there is something of an elective affinity between the accumulation of cultural and financial capital. At first glance this seems unlikely. According to Weber (1976), the driving ethic of industrial capitalism is 'this-worldly asceticism', a secularised version of the Protestant ethic. Following

Veblen (1970), on the other hand, the collecting of art appears *prima facie* to be a blatant instance of conspicuous consumption. The incompatibility seems all the more extreme when it is recalled that Veblen introduced the idea of conspicuous consumption as a public display of conspicuous *leisure*. And whether or not one believes Weber, leisure is the last thing one would associate with the entrepreneur. The apparent incompatibility may be the product of a category mistake. Whereas conspicuous consumption is a practice, the Protestant ethic is...an ethic. To assume a priori that a practice is semiotically unambiguous is to bet against the creative powers of the casuist. John D. Rockefeller exemplifies:

He was uneasy about his enjoyment of these objects. Should a simple puritan allow himself such sybaritic indulgence? But he found his justification: The beautiful objects would 'in time probably come into public possession through their ownership by museums'. In the end beauty would be preserved for a wider audience. (Saarinen, 1959: 352)

That a man whose business practices repeatedly ran foul of the US judiciary (Piott, 1985: 113-48) could think of himself as a 'simple puritan' speaks volumes for the interpretive powers of devotional reflection. By comparison, re-thinking the consumption of art as a good work in the sight of the Lord can have taken no more than a moment. For mortal beings, in fact, any form of consumption which does not deteriorate its object can be represented as a kind of custodianship on behalf of future generations. In some cases Rockefeller's 'probably' (as in 'my collection of artworks will probably pass into public ownership') - was transformed into certainty and, with it, self-indulgence into public duty by the practice of purchasing art on behalf of a charitable trust or museum. Only the cynic would draw attention to the fact that this arrangement enabled the masterpieces in question to hang tax-deductible in the purchasers' own homes for the duration of their natural lives (Taylor and Brook, 1969: 70).

Case 2: Of camp and interior design

In the second illustration, the disabling profession is interior design as it was represented in a two home-makeover programmes broadcast in 2003: *Changing rooms* and *Design rules*. The excerpts which follow were transcribed from these programmes. In both of them, ordinarily disordered interiors volunteered by members of the public were analysed and transformed by the television design pundit, Laurence Llewellyn-Bowen, and his associates. In making the case for professional design expertise, both programmes included sequences in which the camera slowly panned over a room in its initial state of dishevelment to the accompaniment of a voice-over which drew attention to its every deficiency. As with Duveen's commentary on Hearst's art collection, the message was that of

disabling professionalism: that left to themselves the owners of the rooms were incapable of arranging for their own comfort and aesthetic satisfaction.

Llewellyn-Bowen's television image was integral to this message. That image might be described as institutional camp – 'institutional' in that the fastidious attention to personal appearance, gesture and speech characteristic of camp (Sontag, 2001), has not infrequently been adopted as a signifier of professional competence in the decorative arts. Less obvious is the connection of camp to the project of *professionalizing* interior design by inducing a sense of inadequacy in its amateur practitioners. In its verbal manifestation, camp is a vocabulary of finely calculated insult, an aspect which is absent from Sontag's otherwise illuminating discussion. It is a pseudo-insider language which flatters those who catch its nuances into collusion with its deftly-accomplished victimizations. Smith's (1974) account of the Regency fop Beau Brummell illustrates the point. Following his painstaking hours at the dressing-table, Brummell would take the air attended by a considerable audience, drawn not only by the peacock finery on display but also by the duels of delicately calculated insult in which Brummell would re-establish his ascendancy over his rivals.

So it was that the typical episode of *Changing rooms* would open with Llewellyn-Bowen exercising his wit at the expense of the room's owner. The designer speaks:

Julia has been renovating her 1900s house for the last 3 years but work has clearly ground to a halt in the master bedroom...Tell you what people. You don't need to live like this. You don't need bare plaster walls. You don't need rustic cupboards and you certainly don't need terminally geriatric curtains held back by frills that have obviously had a previous incarnation somewhere rather personal... Sometimes I walk into a room and I feel nice. But then I don't walk into rooms like this very often. This is vile. What do you want from a bedroom? Do you want stimulus? Do you want excitement? Do you want peacefulness? Do you want tranquillity and calm? You're not going to get any of that if you decorate your bedroom like this. This is the interior decorating equivalent of an overdose of bed-time cocoa...Look at the bed. Yawn! Look at the carpet. Yawn! Yawn! Yawn! I want to sleep for a thousand years in here. Luckily this room is about to receive a wake-up call. Anna Rider-Richardson is round the corner and she's feeling sassy. (*Changing Rooms* BBC 1 15/09/03 8.30)

Camp is an idiom in which this kind of fastidious disdain is an accepted norm of expression. As well as establishing the speaker as a person of aesthetic sensibility – and as such one capable of the act of design - it connects with the aspirations of design professionalism in that the amateur interior is depicted as an object of ridicule. As was the case with the deprecatory murmurs of Joseph Duveen, this is the rhetoric of a disabling profession. The taste of the room's occupant – and it is

clear that some of its features were intentional – is depicted as an embarrassment, not least to the person whose taste it is.

Two ways of looking at a room

The rhetoric of design professionalism does not work simply by discovering particular occasions for embarrassment in the undesigned interior. These perceptions are the product of a specialized way of looking at the interior: one that insists on viewing it as a composition rather than a narrative of the lives lived within it. This next sample of Llewellyn-Bowen's wit is taken from the series *Design rules*. Our resident aesthete is lounging elegantly on the bed, looking towards its foot:

That's the focal point and you need something there that's going to delight the eye [Looks at the table at the foot of the bed] Suntan oil, dirty hair brush, dusty old trinket box, somebody's ex-teddy bear. I don't think my eyes are satisfied at this moment. (*Design Rules* BBC2 4/08/03 7.30)

It is unlikely ever to have occurred to the people who lived in this room to think of the foot of the bed as defining a focal point around which the views should be composed. But Llewellyn-Bowen thinks they should. To him, the room is a composition, and at the moment it is a bad one. This holistic view of the interior is fundamental to professional interior design. As Llewellyn-Bowen puts it, 'It's about balance, It's about order. It's about conceiving and considering the room as a whole' (ibid.).

It takes an effort for the occupant of a room to look at it like this because it is a view stripped of its personal associations and detached from the particular uses to which it is put. The eye of the designer, on the other hand, is that of a stranger for whom these associations do not exist and for whom function is reduced to such generic categories as 'bedroom'. There are occasions, of course, when the occupant of a dwelling would find it appropriate to view it with an impersonal eye, notably when it is up for sale – and in a overheated property market, this may account for some of the appeal of home-makeover programmes. To live day-to-day in an environment designed with the eye of a stranger for the use of a stranger, however, is to experience – alienation.

Interior design as personality

Llewellyn-Bowen, to give him his due, was sensitive to the depersonalising pressures implicit in design professionalism. In one of the *Design Rules* programmes he introduced one Mark Jeffries, who spoke of his growing dissatisfaction with the kind of design package which attracted him to his first flat:

When I moved into my very first flat it was wonderfully minimal. Table, vase, twigs, you know, a very trendy parrot in the corner. It was all reflective of trends and not really who I was. It was about me wanting to create some kind of impression – at that time it was on girls, obviously...But now this [room] reflects a life and so much has gone on. Then I would have felt that this would be cluttered but now I just love it because everywhere I look there's something that pops out at me and I love that. (*Design rules*, BBC2 11/08/03 7.30)

Coming to terms with this narrative aspect of people's homes presents a severe problem for design professionalism. At the level of rhetoric it is solved by claims that the professional possesses the expertise to express the client's personality through the designed interior:

One of the most exciting things about my job is working out what people's personalities are like and what kind of styles they might like and I pick that up from what kind of mugs they've got. If they've got little cuddly animals on the mugs or whether they've got stripy mugs or plain mugs and I always ask them whether they chose the mugs or whether somebody gave them to them. (Brigid Calderhead. (*Design rules*, 11/08/03. BBC2 7.30)

Stripy mugs or plain mugs? It would be unkind to comment in detail on what is clearly an unguarded remark. What it has in common with more sophisticated expressions of the same approach, however, is that 'expressing a personality' is reduced to a matter of choosing a pre-packaged theme or idiom which harmonises with the client's previous choices. Given the limitations of time and budgets, this is not unreasonable in itself, but it falls a long way short of the ordinary language meaning of 'personality'. For Kron (1983: 151 ff.), to allow even this is to concede too much to the rhetoric of client self-expression. Citing a number of examples, she makes a case that the practice of interior design, particularly at the level which attracts the attention of the major style magazines, is primarily oriented towards the establishment of a professional reputation. In pursuit of this, any client interference with what she calls 'design authoritarianism' (ibid.: 251) is firmly resisted. She comments as follows on the claim of a 1920s taste magazine that conformity to good taste need not suppress individuality (ibid.: 70):

Thus, a harmonized depersonalized-looking room by architect Joseph Urban was proclaimed in *House and Garden* to be the very model of personalization. 'To be happily liveable', the magazine explained, 'a room should express the thoughts of the designer who controls the scheme and makes the room artistic and should contain articles cherished by the owner'. The cherished articles in this case were one vase, two candlesticks, and some books. Individuality was invited to the party but was hardly the guest of honour.

The individual confronted and constricted by objectified taste in the field of interior design was the subject of a polemic fantasy by the pioneer modernist

architect, Adolf Loos. *Poor little rich man* (1900, reprinted in Loos, 1982: 125-7) is the story of a wealthy man who engages an architect of the Viennese Jugendstil to transform his home into a total work of Art. At first the client is overjoyed.

Wherever he cast his glance was Art...He grasped Art when he took hold of a door handle; he sat on Art when he settled into an armchair; he buried his head in Art when, tired, he lay down on a pillow...' (ibid.: 125)

Soon, however, the client finds he must replace every casually-used item exactly in accordance with the architect's drawings if the overall effect is not to be ruined. Loos concludes:

For him, there would be no more painters, no more artists, no more craftsmen. He was precluded from all future living and striving, developing and desiring. He thought, 'this is what it means to learn to go about life with one's own corpse'. Yes indeed. He is finished. He is complete. (ibid.: 127)

The irony is that, as the Twentieth Century progressed, the modernist functionalism which Loos envisaged as a movement of liberation became instead the preferred idiom of a new design authoritarianism. In the context of this paper, a single illustration will have to suffice: Gerrit Reitveld, one of the leading architect/designers of De Stijl prevented his client from hanging a painting in the surgery which had been designed for him. Promising to 'do something' himself, Reitveld painted a large red circle on the upper part of the wall, supposedly harmonizing with the planes of grey, white and black which defined the walls, floor and ceiling (Overy, 1991: 96).

Conclusions

In opposition to the view that the contemporary self is largely created in the sphere of consumption, this paper has argued that the tastes expressed in acts of cultural consumption are as likely to be alienations from the self as expressions of it. Ranging from the critics to the producers and purveyors of cultural artefacts, the individual is confronted by a range of occupations whose existence depends on their capacity to mould taste as this is expressed in acts of consumption. The basic move in this commodification of taste is to undermine people's ability to form independent critical judgments so that a market for expertise is created in the sphere of cultural consumption – a tactic which Ivan Illich (1977) called 'disabling professionalism'. The result of this induced dependency on critical discourses is that the act of consumption loses its expressive quality and becomes instrumentalized as a presentation of self. This possibility is disallowed by the theory of 'commodified identities' (Benwell and

Stokoe, 2006: 165ff.), because its ontology collapses the distinction between the self and a presentation of self.

This contention is illustrated through the examination of two tactics of disabling professionalism as they are employed in the commercialization of taste. The first is from a biography of Lord Duveen of Millbank, the art dealer responsible above all others for the collections of Renaissance masterworks amassed by the millionaires of US capitalism in its entrepreneurial phase. The second is from two of the many home-makeover program broadcast by UK television in which the typical inconvenience and disorder of the average home is transformed according to professional standards of interior design. Considered as presentations of self, both the art collection and the remade interior exemplify alienations of consumption.

In the course of making this argument, it has been necessary to defend the concept of alienation against the charges of essentialism and economic determinism which have been levelled against it in recent decades. The first charge rests on a confusion between a *determination* (here, of alienation) which allows for other concurrent influences and a *determinism*, which does not. The second is reflected back at the anti-essentialist in the form of a question: if 'human nature' is always historically and culturally given, what (distinctively human) capacities are needed to create this historical and cultural variation? The answer proposed in this paper is 'collective intentionality' as it has been discussed by Searle (1995) and Tomassello (2008). On this basis an outline definition of alienation might be an impairment of the capacity for collective intentionality. According to this definition, an instrumentalization of cultural consumption qualifies as an alienation in that consumption takes place *as if* one shared the intentionality of a community of appreciation rather than because one actually does so.

The paper also discusses the parallels and divergences between this analysis and Bourdieu's (1984) analysis of cultural stratification. Clearly cultural consumption must be objectified if it is to function as a kind of capital. Equally clearly, the recognition of cultural capital by those who do not possess it – Bourdieu's 'acknowledgement' (1984: 318) – entails the objectification of taste as an index of inferiority. Yet Bourdieu seems to deny the possibility of alienation in his portrayal of the 'legitimate culture' (ibid.: 23 etc.) which serves as the gold-standard of cultural capital. Legitimate culture to Bourdieu is an organic (i.e. non-alienated) expression of the habitus of an 'aristocracy of culture' (ibid.: 11 etc.), a social stratum from whom it also derives its status as legitimate. On closer examination, Bourdieu's aristocracy of culture turns out to be either empirically elusive or to consist of the producers of cultural artefacts and the critical

commentaries which (seek to) establish them as components of legitimate culture. It is the overlapping categories of producer, critic, educator and (frequently) commercial intermediary which produce both legitimate culture *and* the discourses which establish it as such. In the sense that livelihoods are at stake, this means that legitimate culture is *always* the subject of commodification. Correspondingly, there is *no* social stratum whose patterns of consumption automatically qualify as legitimate culture and are thereby exempt from the possibility of alienation.

Alienated consumption matters because it subtracts from the possibilities of human expressiveness and thereby adds to the potential for mutual isolation. As the journalist Russell Lynes once put it: 'A great many people enjoy having taste, but too few of them really enjoy the things they have taste about' (Lynes, 1959: 338). The aim of this paper has been to establish that the commodification of taste extends beyond the 'mass deception' of Adorno and Horkheimer (1997). Especially vulnerable to its seductions are those who seek to differentiate themselves from the common herd. Some of them, indeed, go on to become cultural critics on their own account, and to perpetuate the belief that untutored taste is 'barbarism', as Bourdieu puts it (1984: 41).

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