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**The metamorphoses of cultural capital in a neoliberal and multicultural era:  
towards a comparative approach**

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**CNRS-EHESS**

This in-depth inquiry into the lifestyles and cultural practices in Australia is a major contribution to the on-going discussions sparked by the publication and translation of Bourdieu's *Distinction* (1979/1984) (see, especially, Duval and Coulangeon, 2014). Combining a quantitative and qualitative (interview-based) approach, this survey makes a rigorous and heuristic use of Bourdieu's concepts and methodology to understand the social structure of taste and cultural practices in Australia today.<sup>1</sup> I shall first address briefly how it contributes to these debates and then turn to research directions that this survey opens up, especially in a comparative perspective, in the context of neoliberalism and multiculturalism. I shall also consider the question of gender.

**Confirming the impact of class and education on cultural practices and taste**

First of all, this survey challenges two theses that attempted to contest the validity of Bourdieu's findings beyond its specific socio-historical context. Peterson's thesis on the growing 'omnivorism' of the dominant classes (Peterson and Kern, 1996) is here strongly qualified by taking into account the historical process of legitimation of cultural goods, and by including

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<sup>1</sup> One can regret, however, that the tables of the contributions of modalities of the Multiple Correspondence Analysis are not published in the Appendices, nor the clouds of individuals for the fields, although the latter are partly compensated for by the cluster analyses.

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questions not only about likes but also dislikes, which follow clear social cleavages (this thesis has been challenged in other studies, namely one on Denmark; Prieur *et al.*, 2008). The thesis of horizontal eclecticism and the predominance of age is invalidated: it is only in music and television that age prevails over class, which comes first in the most legitimate fields of art and literature, as well as in heritage. Moreover, even in the music field, by taking into account the degree of involvement in different musical cultures, this research 'qualifies the contention of the eclecticism thesis regarding a flattening out of genre tastes across social positions given the strong role played by age, level of education and class position in differentiating levels of participation in different kinds of musical event' (Bennett, Dibley and Gayo, 2022: 60).

Like the findings of the British and Danish surveys (Bennett *et al.*, 2009; Prieur *et al.*, 2008), however, the main structuring opposition here is participation (visiting art galleries, reading book reviews, attending orchestral concerts or opera, etc.), as opposed to non-participation in the forms of cultural life surveyed (except for television). Nevertheless, the refined cluster analysis of six cultural profiles shows that these practices correlate with taste (likes and dislikes) and knowledge about culture and, of course, with occupation and education, even though they combine with age and gender. Taking into account inherited cultural capital (through the variables of parents' education) confirms the impact of cultural capital (conversely, it has been shown, for the French case, that a certain selective eclecticism in musical tastes may be related to upward social mobility; Coulangeon, 2015). MCA and cluster analysis also serve to explore the middle space of Australian lifestyles occupied by the middle class and its specific age and taste divisions, to which a thorough study and discussion (including a very pertinent critique of the notions of highbrow, middlebrow, and lowbrow) is devoted in the book.

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### **A dynamic and changing space, traversed by struggles**

Secondly, rather than a static account, this study presents the space of cultural practices as dynamic and changing. Its dynamics result from the struggles that traverse it: competition and struggles among fields, hierarchised according to their legitimacy, which depends in large part upon state recognition and policies; competition and struggles between national culture and both transnational culture and Indigenous culture (which both also depend on state policies). These struggles affect the space of cultural possibilities and the symbolic value allocated to different items and genres. Beyond these findings, the shifts that they produce, one could argue, demonstrate that symbolic value does not stem only from scarcity: minorities and Indigenous cultures are also scarce resources with regard to the majority but, in nation states, they are often devoid of symbolic value outside their specific communities. One can thus contend that the relative value of scarcity is indexed to social hierarchy and to the ability of dominant groups to impose their tastes and practices as the most valuable. This contention could open one direction for future research: under which social conditions are scarce resources endowed with symbolic capital?

The changing attitude towards Indigenous culture, previously devalued, and now legitimised – attesting to the emergence of 'indigenous cultural capital' (Daozhi Xu, 2018) – is not specific to Australia but can be observed in the US, Canada, and Brazil, and the processes of this recognition have been in part transnational. Both the study of these processes and the changing attitudes of the majority towards these Indigenous heritages call for more in-depth research. Furthermore, beyond national recognition, one could inquire about their international recognition. For instance, like contemporary native American or native Canadian art, which are represented by galleries, contemporary Aboriginal art has been valued for some time under this label on the international art market and exhibited in European art fairs. However, it is a niche market which emerged in the wake of the recognition and labelling of the 'Arts Premiers',

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parallel to that of 'world music', both categories referring to cultural forms of non-Western origin. One could also trace back the processes of their legitimation by agents of the art field, for instance the avant-garde artists who discovered and valued African Arts in the first half of the century, the surrealists who discovered Inuit art in the 1940s, or the role of specialists such as the ethnomusicologist Robert Brown, who coined the term 'world music'. It could then be asked in what ways are these processes comparable (or not) to the legitimation of jazz music (see Roueff, 2013), Studying these processes of the legitimation of Indigenous culture in comparative perspective, between genres and media within different cultures, but also through a transnational approach, could thus be a second direction for further research.

Specific attention should be driven to the labelling process, which plays a key role in the process of legitimation by which cultural products acquire symbolic capital that can be converted in economic capital in the market for symbolic goods ('primitive arts' was abandoned because of its colonial and evolutionary connotation, and replaced by others such as 'arts premiers' in French, or 'tribal', 'non-Western' or 'ethnographic' art in English). Classifications such as the distinction between 'ritual objects' and 'craft objects' produced for the colonizer or for tourists are also relevant, especially in the current debate about cultural appropriation and restitution, which is part of the international struggles over heritage and patrimonialization.

### **International comparisons**

Thirdly, this book opens more broadly to international comparison, not only thanks to the rich findings but also to the thorough discussion of their cultural and social significance compared to Bourdieu's study of France in the 1960s-1970s, and to the more contemporary survey in the United Kingdom (Bennett *et al.*, 2009). This comparison could be extended to surveys in Norway (Rosenlund 2000), Denmark (Prieur, A. *et al.*, 2008) and Portugal (Pereira, 2018).

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Furthermore, the Australian study suggests some directions for new surveys in the light of current transformations.

On the one hand, this study reveals some specificities of the Australian field, a relatively young country with a settler-colonial history, where the social gaps are smaller than in the UK. These specificities are reflected in some of the cultural practices, especially in the field of heritage, but also in relation to national and Indigenous cultural products. On the other hand, some findings correspond to transnational trends: first, the role of international conglomerates, especially in the music and book industries, as well as in the global art field, in challenging national hierarchies; and second, the transformation of cultural policies in the neoliberal era, which tend to promote cultural products reaching a wider audience to the detriment of more experimental cultural forms, although the implementation of these policies varies across fields and across countries. Comparing the impact of these policies in different Western countries and fields, and questioning the extent to which they support or counter the local strategies of the large international conglomerates, would then provide a basis for a better understanding of the evolution of cultural practices. Cinema, which is absent from the present survey, is the field where the transnational is the most dominant, followed by music; but in some countries, national production is more protected than in others (the same applies to music, literature, and art).

National policies do not always support the most autonomous products against economic heteronomy, since their support aims first and foremost to promote national culture, and more and more the national cultural industries. The comparison should take into account the position of the country in the power relations across national cultures – the United States having taken the hegemonic position previously occupied by France - and the position of cultural capital in the national field of power, which has been declining in France (Denord *et al.*, 2011), as elsewhere (Prieur and Savage, 2011). When Bourdieu conducted his study, France

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was still a culturally dominant country, widely exporting its cultural products. Today, the (relative) decline of the position of cultural capital in the French field of power is a result of the rise of economic (and financial) capital, triggered by global neoliberal trends under US dominance. Still, France has implemented a cultural policy to protect its cultural industries from American domination, even though this policy may promote some cultural products modelled on their American counterparts, but made in France. This policy can sometimes be detrimental to experimental artists (considering that it is not the most experimental American products that circulate, but those promoted by industries such as Hollywood).

### **Transnational, Indigenous and migrant cultures: a challenge to the 'national habitus'**

Transnational, Indigenous and migrant cultures seem to challenge the homogeneity of the 'national habitus', which provokes conservative and reactionary attacks on these cultures. Although this homogeneity is, of course, a social construction (Thiesse, 2021), since national cultures were built by translating and importing foreign cultural products and models, the cultures of minorities have been historically devalued (apart from in the culinary sphere, which is not addressed here either), as a result of what Bourdieu calls the 'hierarchisation of legitimate identities' operated by the state (Bourdieu 2012/2014).

However, the symbolic value of this national culture varies, as noted, according to its relative position within global cultural fields. In all countries, the attitude of the most educated fractions alternate between promoting the national culture and granting higher value to the transnational products. Of course, these groups often have different social properties, as the present Australian survey also shows, but the meaning of this alternative (and the relative position of each option) may be reversed when moving from dominant to dominated cultures, where dominant fractions of the dominant class are usually those which import foreign cultural

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models, references and products, while in the dominant cultures it is the dominated fractions which tend to import them in order to subvert the national fields (Sapiro, 2018).

The boost samples of tastes and cultural practices of Indigenous people and of migrant communities, when compared to the majority, open very promising research paths beyond the traditional policy-oriented 'adaptation' problematic, which is rightly described here as sociologically reductive and misleading. One of these possibilities could be to compare them to similar migrant communities - for instance, Chinese or Lebanese - in other countries. The focus on these communities also questions more broadly the relation of migrants from non-Western cultures to Western cultural heritage, showing, predictably, a bigger distance from it than the Italian migrant community, although the distance tends to decline in the next generation. The ways in which non-Western migrants may appropriate (or not) the host cultural forms, and perhaps mix or hybridize them with the ones into which they have been socialized, and the importation of the latter into the broader national community by their mediation, is a fascinating question that is not new, but is one that has taken on new dimensions in the era of globalization and multiculturalism (with the already mentioned partial recognition and legitimation of non-Western cultures).

### **Gendered practices**

Finally, the gender issue merits some further development. One of the recurrent critiques of *Distinction* involves the secondary position assigned to gender compared to class. The Australian survey confirms Bourdieu's findings. Nevertheless, a chapter on gender that re-reads the data and compares the practices of women from different classes and levels of education in the different fields would have been useful. Although, as in *Distinction*, the survey demonstrates that gender is secondary to class in most fields, the focus on fields also shows that the gender cleavage varies across them in interesting ways that are discussed across the whole study: for



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instance, gender is not statistically prominent in the art field, while it is the most prominent variable in the field of sport.

This is also an interesting finding that might serve as the basis of a comparative study across countries. Would we expect the gender divide in sport to change dramatically in some places? Probably not. Two explanations can be provided for this likelihood: first, some cultural practices signify class distinction, but others clearly express gender distinction (as used to be the case with smoking, going to the 'pub', and, of course, sport practices, which are still strongly gendered because of differential early socialization into sport and the gender separation in many sport games). The other explanation has to do with the relative autonomy of these fields. It is not by chance that gender has less impact on the most autonomous field, art, since one of the effects of autonomy is precisely to blur social differences in favour of the amount of specific capital. Here, inherited cultural capital and access to education is a condition that encourages and facilitates the acquisition of such specific capital, even though this social difference is masked in the end by this specific capital.

The fact that reading practices, especially of fiction, were feminised since women gained access to reading in the nineteenth century, was perhaps linked to the lifestyle of middle-class women who were not working and so stayed at home. But, these conditions cannot explain why women are still, in many Western countries, the most engaged readers of fiction and literary festival goers. In a survey I conducted with a team of postgraduate students, we observed the same higher share of women - more than 70 per cent –among the 460 respondents to a questionnaire administered to attendees at the Manosque literary festival *Les Correspondances* in France, a share confirmed by ethnographic observation (Sapiro *et al.*, 2015; Picaud *et al.*, 2020). However, it is telling that the correlation between gender and genre grows when one goes from legitimate literature to popular literary genres such as romance vs.

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sci-fi/fantasy, for instance, or to practical books (self-help) vs. books about sport, as this and earlier surveys have shown (see, for instance, Parmentier, 1986).

### **Fields of production and spaces of consumption**

In the above respect, the use of the concept of field in the survey to describe the different practices of the whole population is a little misleading. It certainly helps capture the social frontier between those who are 'in' and those who are 'out', and this is a valuable result, but focusing on those who take part in the field as consumers (and some as producers) in specific MCAs might have better revealed the fields' structures. The fields are mainly presented in the book through changing cultural policies, and through the cleavages between legitimate/popular and conservative/innovative tastes of different fractions of the class of professionals and managers. It would be instructive to check whether their options correspond to the actual options in the fields of cultural production.

One site of observation for this question would be festivals, as they act as consecrating authorities in the different fields (on the literary field, see Sapiro, 2022), and offer an opportunity to study the degree of engagement of consumers (Prieur and Savage, 2011). In our research on the Manosque literary festival *Les Correspondances*, we observed different types of engagement in the festival according to different holdings of cultural capital, and distinguished those endowed with specific 'literary capital (reading reviews, going to literary events, knowing the authors, and so on) from those possessing general 'cultural capital' (going to concerts, opera, cinema, and so on). Similar differences were found in the Australian survey in the different fields by combining variables about going to festivals, reading reviews, attending performances, and so on.

Studies dedicated to the venues are required in order to understand how the consumers meet the cultural supply of live performances, and the role of cultural intermediaries in this

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process (on music venues, see Picaud, 2022). The social properties of these cultural intermediaries (i.e., editors, literary agents, art gallerists, or music programmers) have an impact on the supply. Has their social recruitment changed? What is the impact of these changes? Their feminization is certainly one of these major evolutions since the 1980s, but the question of whether it has had an effect on the cultural supply has not yet been addressed in a large and comparative perspective across cultural forms, genres and cultures.

To conclude, this book offers a great opportunity to launch a vast comparative and transnational research program on the changing forms of cultural capital in the era of neoliberalism and multiculturalism.

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