OVERVIEW OF BOURDIEU AND LITERARY SOCIOLOGY.

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Of Bourdieu’s contributions to cultural theory, it is the concept of "cultural capital " that has most attracted the attention of literary critics and theorists. In the first instance, this is probably because the term opens up new ways of discussing high and low, "mass " and "elite " cultures without prioritizing either—in other words, avoiding both elitist defenses of high culture and populist celebrations of low culture. The opposition between high and low within the field of culture replicates, or is homologous to, a wider opposition that pits the holders of cultural capital against the holders of financial capital. The latter are, overall, dominant (and constitute the dominant fraction of the dominant class); the former, however, are also part of the dominant class (and constitute its dominated fraction). Beneath both are the dominated class, short of cultural and financial capital alike. In the context of their antagonism toward the holders of financial capital, the dominated fraction of the dominant class—teachers, professors, artists, intellectuals—often ally themselves with the dominated class, articulating (but therefore also misrepresenting) a distinction between forms of capital in ideological terms. However, Bourdieu insists that rather than taking either aesthetic or ideological statements on their own terms, we should look first at the composition and forms of capital structuring a given field and then at the competition between agents aiming to secure or maintain their capital reserves (and to secure the dominance of one form of capital over another).

Bourdieu argues that society as a whole is composed of a series of more or less autonomous fields—such as the academic field analyzed in Homo Academicus (1984, Homo Academicus, 1988 ), itself subdivided into fields that take the form of faculties and disciplines—each of which replicates the fundamental structural distinction between financial and cultural capital, but in its own specific ways and allowing its own repertoire of strategies of consecration or dissent. Bourdieu often uses metaphors or analogies drawn from sports to describe the conflicts that structure each of these fields, to argue, for instance, that there is a difference between the explicit rules operative in a particular social space and the internalized, implicit rules that determine who is to be the better player in any given contest. Participants tend to internalize and embody these rules—to constitute what Bourdieu terms a “habitus," which operates beneath the level of ideology—such that the difference between subjectivity and objectivity as social agents play the game of culture is as ineffable as is an answer to the question whether a skilled player follows or controls the ball in a game of tennis.

Among literary critics and theorists, Bourdieu’s most widely read work is probably La Distinction (1979, Distinction, 1987). Here, analyzing responses to a nationwide survey on cultural tastes, he maps the chiasmic division between the holders of cultural and financial capital and proceeds to outline the distinct (class) habitus that embody different dispositions toward culture itself. Holders of cultural capital embody an aestheticizing disposition that emphasizes (apparent) disinterest by subordinating function to form: they “introduce a distance, a gap . . . by displacing the interest from the 'content,' characters, plot, etc., to the form, to the specifically artistic effects which are only appreciated relationally, through a
comparison with other works which is incompatible with immersion in the singularity with
the work immediately given " (Distinction 34). They tend to prefer abstraction and formal
complexity to the realism or romanticism of bourgeois and mass market culture. However,
here, the salient distinction is that between the dominant class tout court and a dominated
class that does not have the luxury of such distance from a world full of real needs and real
exigencies. On these grounds, Bourdieu conducts an assault on the Kantian aesthetic and its
radical separation of the "beautiful " from the "useful. " immanuel kant’s "pure " taste,
Bourdieu argues, misrecognizes the social relationship that, ironically, the notion itself
institutes in distinguishing between those who can afford to defer social interest and those
who cannot. Aesthetic "disinterest, " however, is anything but: it is a reflex of a horror of the
masses, "nothing other than a refusal, a disgust—a disgust for objects which impose
enjoyment and a disgust for the crude, vulgar taste which revels in this imposed enjoyment "
(Distinction 486). It is on similar grounds, in other words for its post-Kantian affirmation of
(interested) disinterestedness, that Bourdieu also criticizes the work of jacques derrida and,
by implication, poststructuralism more generally.

Cultural capital breeds cultural capital: because the aestheticizing disposition emphasizes
formal similarities between works of art, it also assumes sufficient familiarity to make
establishing similarities viable. (This is a point Bourdieu makes perhaps most forcefully in his
Moreover, as he argues in books such as Les Héritiers (1966, The Inheritors, 1979)and La
Reproduction (1970, Reproduction, 1977), both cowritten with Jean-Claude Passeron, the
(French) educational system rewards this familiarity garnered through inheritance more
effectively than it provides the dominated with tools to overcome their dominated condition.
Indeed, schooling tends rather to confirm to the dominated the truth and rectitude of their
own domination by naturalizing a familiarity and confidence (confidence, again, to defer
immediate interest) itself born of privilege. Because of his sometimes dystopian outlook,
Bourdieu is often criticized for his supposed "hyperfunctionalism. " In fact, however, his
work is premised on social change, on the emergence of new fields and on the diverse and
changing strategies that specific agents employ to maintain, convert, or exploit their reserves
of cultural or financial capital. Bourdieu describes cultural fields in terms of a perpetual and
multivalent agonism, as agents play the game of cultural distinction and capital accumulation
in conditions that, thanks to the temporal delay inherent in the notion of strategy as deferral,
are always subtly different from the conditions under which agents’ habitus were formed.
The expectations generated (and frustrated) by this "hypostasis " of habitus set the scene for
more generalized social conflict and unrest: most notably, for Bourdieu, the events of May
1968 should be understood in terms of an expanding educational system’s inability to
reciprocate the investments of upwardly mobile students. However, this notion of cultural
conflict rarely conforms to the simpler class antagonism that other social critics may discern;
indeed, it may seem frustrating in that the essence of the game is that the goalposts keep
moving.