

Contemporary Contributions to the Sociology and Philosophy of Culture

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It was the classical social theorist Karl Marx, in his *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, who made the statement that a "class of small peasant proprietors"<sup>1</sup>, "cannot represent themselves, they must be represented"<sup>2</sup>. (Tucker 1978, pg. 608) This brings up the issue of "mediation" in the political sphere in the process of forming a sociology or philosophy of culture. If an emergent class of capitalists cannot represent themselves outside the marketplace, they need to turn to the bureaucracy of the nation-state to acknowledge their presence. It was the early-modern political philosopher Thomas Hobbes, in *Leviathan*, who believed that man in the state of nature was indeed brutal, and that he needed to surrender his right and transfer his authority to a hegemonic State that would protect him. Enlightenment social philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau, in *The Social Contract*, believed that men would actually come together and voluntarily form/accept this type of State to administer their public and social affairs. And since the social and political thought Karl Marx has reached its conceivable endings, numerous social critics of late have commented on the cultural ramifications of accepting totalizing conceptions of government. I want to examine how contemporary sociologists and philosophers of culture such as Jean Baudrillard, Michel Foucault, and Pierre Bourdieu have all followed in such a tradition, in one way or another.

In *Jean Baudrillard: From Marxism to Postmodernism and Beyond*, philosopher and cultural theorist Douglas Kellner outlines all of Baudrillard's famous works and states that the young Baudrillard was very much committed to Marxist criticism. To fully elaborate on a cotemporary sociology or philosophy of culture, one must examine the

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<sup>1</sup> As articulated by post-colonialism scholar Edward Said in the Introduction to his book *Orientalism* (Vintage, 1979).

<sup>2</sup> Cultural commentator Henry Louis Gates, Jr. also turns to this famous quote in his article *Writing, "Race," and the Difference It Makes* (Critical Inquiry, 1985).

early cultural theorists of structuralism that reigned supreme in Baudrillard's formative years. While Jean Baudrillard was studying with philosopher of culture Henri Lefebvre in France, cultural theorists such as Claude Levi-Strauss and Jacques Lacan were only beginning to digest the structuralist stance conceived by linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, as stated in the 1916 posthumously published *Course in General Linguistics*. For cultural anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss, this involved viewing myths not only diachronically (horizontally), but also synchronically (vertically). That is, the structuralist would "freeze the system"<sup>3</sup> and look for similarities and differences (very much like a code). Concerning philosopher and psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, the algorithm for metaphor that was published in *Ecrits* [f(S...S')S=S(-)s] involved describing signification with a 'S' rather than a 's'<sup>4</sup>. Both cultural theories (synchronicity and signifier-centrism) were hugely influential in critical theorist Jean Baudrillard's formation of a postmodern critique of society.

In *Simulacra and Simulation*, Jean Baudrillard displays his cultural Marxist foundation and writes that "it was capital which was the first to feed throughout its history on the destruction of every referential, of every human goal" (Poster 2001, pg. 182). Jean Baudrillard theorizes about a "hyperreality"<sup>5</sup> where one sign leads to another (only to lead to another). We can view capital as fueling such activity. Baudrillard is obsessed with Disneyland, an institution that exudes simulation and the convergence of

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<sup>3</sup> As described by commentator Louis Markos in his lecture on linguist Ferdinand de Saussure's structuralism in *Great Minds of the Western Intellectual Tradition* (published in 2000 by The Teaching Company).

<sup>4</sup> Originally, Ferdinand de Saussure believed that S=signified and s=signifier. Only after fully digesting *Course in General Linguistics*, did philosopher and psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan (in the "Agency of the Letter" from *Ecrits*) write that 'S' could actually equal the signifier (it is actually the sign that reigns supreme in the structuralist endeavor).

<sup>5</sup> Semiotician Umberto Eco applies this concept in his own writings, as evident in "Travels in Hyperreality".

marketplace and contemporary culture. Social philosopher Karl Marx, the proto-structuralist, had the foresight to predict that the modern individual would fetishize commodities to the point that consuming the commodity would have its own contemporary cultural logic. Tourism is the world's largest industry today. Consumers indeed pay an exorbitant amount of money to observe the "social practices"<sup>6</sup> of others. The appeal of Disneyland or Epcot is that the postmodern subject can travel the simulated world in one day.

Cultural theorist Arjun Appadurai's "ethnoscapes" are relevant to such synthetic homogenization of global culture. Issues of migration and demography accompany industries such as tourism in "ethnoscapes". With the emergence of globalization we now have "people flows" that accompany transnational "capital flows". Fetishism has an anthropomorphic origin. Philosopher, political economist, and social theorist Karl Marx's nineteenth century fetishism of commodities informed Frankfurt School philosophers Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno's "Culture Industry" of the mid-twentieth century, which has taken an "ethnic turn" in theorist Arjun Appadurai's late twentieth century/early twenty-first century assessment of global cultural phenomena. Social policy, that is, formally-trained sociologists spending time doing applied work, has risen to the forefront of contemporary culture.

In the opening years of the twenty-first century *praxis* has become much more fashionable than contemporary theory, as demonstrated by social theorist Anthony Giddens' career shift. That is, a long time social theorist has been driven out of his lecture-hall in academia and into the public sphere, in effort to advise a political regime. Cultural theorist Arjun Appadurai writes that "ethnic politics in today's world is that

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<sup>6</sup> Or as the French cultural theorist Michel de Certeau would state as "The Practice of Everyday Life".

*primordia* (whether of language or skin color or neighborhood or kinship) have become globalized". ("Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy", pg. 41, emphases added). Cultural scholars of social life will continue to find applied work as policy advisors - civil society needs to be assured that globalization will be assigned an appropriate "human face". Only when multiculturalism becomes as important as international finance will the archetypal WTO protestor from Seattle in 1999 know his voice has been heard.

In *Discipline and Punish*, historian and philosopher of culture Michel Foucault writes of the hierarchizing of surveillance that has occurred since the founding of Mettray in 1840. As brilliantly described in the lectures of sociologist Spencer Cahill and musicologist Maria Cizmici<sup>7</sup>, the postmodern subject has actually grown to internalize such elements of social control. Issues of identity in contemporary culture involve mastering totalizing mechanisms of control. We have an entire culture of "authenticity" that funds the efforts of "self-help" gurus<sup>8</sup>. These pseudo-authorities tell us to master the art of self-discipline in such acts as dieting and giving up smoking. Philosopher Charles Taylor<sup>9</sup> gives a modernist, narrative inspired, account of historical acts of philosophical thought leading to such contemporary cultural predicaments. In the Foucauldian encounter with postmodernism, the issue of "docility" is raised. In "the great transformation"<sup>10</sup> from enlightened modernist coercion to postmodern fragmentation, historian and philosopher of culture Michel Foucault writes that, "The human body was entering a machinery of

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<sup>7</sup> In "Contemporary Sociological Theory" and "Theory and Methods: A Survey of Critical and Cultural Theory", respectively (2005).

<sup>8</sup> As elaborated by philosopher Charles Guignon in *On Being Authentic* (2004). London: Routledge.

<sup>9</sup> In *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (1989), Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

<sup>10</sup> Karl Polanyi inspired.

power that explores it, breaks it down, and rearranges it. A 'political autonomy,' which was also a 'mechanics of power,' was being born". (Rabinow, 1984, pg. 182) Thus we have the emergence of a new<sup>11</sup>"body politic" that operates outside of "self and subjectivity". We are dealing with an ahistorical entity that is deterministic, rather than metaphysical. We allow social policy to shape our lives. The State is the social realm, as opposed to the Marxian corporate sphere, that is exploitative. The blue collar worker will one day retire and rely on the State to administer benefits to him. Corporatism has structured the majority of his life, yet it is the State that will fund his very existence after he demonstrates an appropriate allegiance to docility (via a long career in the private sphere). Weberian asceticism is a motivator of activity at the workplace, yet it is the duty of social policy to shape a blue collar worker's overarching life projects. In the long term, the State administers our social affairs.

Although cultural critic Walter Benjamin was the first to write about a capitalist marketplace that fetishized the originality and authenticity of "auratic", one-of-a-kind works of art (which in turn drove up their monetary value), it was French public intellectual Pierre Bourdieu who first theorized about an individual having the "cultural capital" to fully appreciate that actual aura the work of art exuded<sup>12</sup>. In *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, Pierre Bourdieu writes that "middle-brow culture is resolutely against vulgarity" (1984, pg. 326). The middle-class is indeed caught up in attempting to learn the lingo of white collar culture and decoding bourgeois works of art (via the attainment of a certain degree of "culture capital"). Here we have the functioning of aesthetics as status symbols. The avant-garde piece of art (whether it

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<sup>11</sup> Anti-Hobbesian, Anti-Machiavellian.

<sup>12</sup> Cultural theorist John Guillory has an entire book devoted to applying Pierre Bourdieu's concept of "cultural capital" to the literary canon.

be a Jackson Pollock or a Mark Rothko) has an esoteric meaning that can serve as a class barrier. Those confused, or lacking the "cultural capital" to understand/decode its meaning, can very well be labeled peasants. There is a certain degree of cultural<sup>13</sup> appreciation involved in asset accumulation, resulting in the demarcation of "high" and "low" brow.

Pierre Bourdieu writes that "the class...exists if and when there exist agents who can say that they are the class, by the mere fact of speaking publicly" ("Social Space and Symbolic Power", pg. 24). It is the upper-class of society that acts publicly through funding cultural institutions such as museums and universities. It is very fashionable for the rich to sit as members on the Board of Trustees of such institutions, and is a very sign of their wealth and success. Our society in fact "hierachizes" (pg. 16) people who hold such distinctions. The upper-class funds such cultural institution to separate them from the blue-collar. Frankfurt School social philosopher Herbert Marcuse writes in *Reason and Revolution: Hegel and the Rise of Social Theory* that, "If the exercises of the absolute mind, art, religion, and philosophy, constitute man's essence, the proletarian is forever severed from his essence, for his existence permits him no time to indulge in these activities" (1954 pg. 261). Here we have the paradox of contemporary culture. We are supposed to all enjoy the aesthetic value of cultural production, yet it seems that the only people with time to enjoy things such as "auratic" art are those who have their money making more money for them (and are not working in excess just to survive financially). Is this a consequence of Weberian asceticism? The enjoyment of art can be labeled as "hedonism", an evil word for those who adhere to the Protestant work ethic. It is through discipline and self control (the very antithesis of hedonistic pursuits) that Benjamin

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<sup>13</sup> aesthetic, not ethnic.

Franklin thought would leave a man “healthy, wealthy, and wise”. This is the very origin of the textbook standardization of culture. The child of the blue collar worker is given the basic literacy to appreciate art and culture through the educational sphere (they learn in school about the key works of art, music, literature, etc.) but an entire, in-depth survey of the humanities is reserved only for a child from the upper-class (with exception to the aspiring artist).

In *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, Hungarian philosopher Georg Lukacs writes that, “The historical knowledge of the proletariat begins with knowledge of the present, with self-knowledge of its social situation and with the elucidation of its necessity” (1968 pg. 159). The contemporary cultural sphere, in such a situation, is outside and beyond the worker’s life world. Art, in such a situation, becomes a characteristic of bourgeois life. Social theorist Max Weber wrote that “‘class situation’ is...ultimately ‘market situation’”. (“Class, Status, Party”, pg. 182) The proletariat has its own conception of what art and culture is, and it originates from the type of artistic and cultural objects that are available for someone with that certain monetary endowment. For example, very few wage workers in New York City can afford to view an opera at the Met in Manhattan. Such a public event is reserved for only the upper-echelon of society. This is how market situation shapes the Weberian notion of class.

The Pierre Bourdieu (Max Weber becomes evident at this point) of *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* may very well be rooted in “status honor”. Max Weber writes that “a specific *style of life* can be expected from all those who wish to belong to the circle”. (“Class, Status, Party”, pg. 187) Certain tastes and preferences can serve as necessary requirements for belonging to a social circle. These tastes can be



labeled as "high-brow" or "low-brow" and have classificatory tendencies. Beyond stratification, preferences can organize social groups at their most micro-level. We see a rather large amount of special interests groups in politics today, yet we also have witnessed the emergence of many different types of clubs, etc. That is, we have NGOs that virtually run the United Nations' day to day activities, but we also have clusters of individuals throughout culture at-large coming together in effort to pursue a common interest. Such an example would be a group of motorcycle enthusiasts who congregate in sunny Florida's Daytona Beach every year out of Durkheimian solidarity. With the emergence of the internet, we have seen on-line chat rooms and listservs that focus on every type of interest possible. And on college campuses, we have seen a wide variety of clubs for those with similar interests<sup>14</sup>.

Social theorist Max Weber writes that "The notion of a societal division of labor and occupational stratification has been conceptualized, by Aquinas, as well as others, as a direct manifestation of God's divine plan". (*The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, pg. 107) From this statement we can draw a parallel to Heidegger's notion of "facticity" and "throwness". That is, German foundations in continental philosophy gives us the grounding to believe we don't have a choice or say in the life situation we are presented with; what matters, however, is how we engage the situation we are presented with. Max Weber saw the individual approaching life with an ascetic urgency, trying to secure his salvation by showing his devotion to the Lord. However, the Max Weber we see in "Class, Status, Party" is more concerned with describing or outlining the various

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<sup>14</sup> For example, my father is faculty advisor to the University of Florida's amateur radio club; he has informed me that the University has approximately 600 clubs at the student level.

ways people actually congregate (on a more secular level). This once again brings up the issue of social and cultural practices.

In *Unruly Practices: Power, Discourse, and Gender in Contemporary Social Theory*, critical theorist Nancy Fraser explores a Foucault-Habermas connection regarding classificatory social activity. She writes that, “Just as Heidegger’s delimitation of humanism was intended to enhance rather to undermine human dignity, so Foucault’s critique, *pace* Habermas, is not an attack on the notions of freedom and reason per se” (1989 pg. 41). Individuals, coaxed by the State, can congregate around special interests. Spectator culture is a profound component of the modern and postmodern identity. Sports and entertainment are mammoth industries because workers find the need for public consumption outside their private sector activities. This is also true of the capitalist. We find that all echelons of society consume certain types of entertainment. Therefore, we can also find Pierre Bourdieu’s spatial element of social differentiation when someone says, “Oh, that jazz listener is so sophisticated”.

Contemporary social theorist Anthony Giddens writes in *Capitalism and Modern Social Theory: An Analysis of the Writings of Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim, and Max Weber*, that “Many instances can be adduced in which men draw clear distinctions between economic possession and status privilege” (1971 pg. 167). Therefore, by calling the jazz listener “sophisticated”, we may very well be implying that that individual has more financial assets than us. Social theorist Anthony Giddens find that although Max Weber does not always equate status with wealth, he writes in the long run that wealth accumulation is a very good indicator of aggregate social status. As a whole, upper-class America has very different cultural interests and preferences than the working class. We

may also say that these tastes are more sophisticated. However, the reason for judging such preferences as attractive is that there is only a slim minority of the wealthy. We come to romanticize the actions and interests of the rich, knowing that we too, through the Weberian work ethic, could come to be like them one day. Those successful in such a pursuit (new money), simulate the cultural practices of their inspirations (old money). Cultural theorist Jean Baudrillard would say that there is a continuous circle of simulation at work here. His explanation would be that people with newly acquired wealth have simply copied the cultural tastes and preferences (theorized about by Pierre Bourdieu) of those that came before them.

It was continental philosopher Jacques Derrida's famous lecture "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences", delivered at Johns Hopkins University in 1966, which ushered in the age of post-structuralism<sup>15</sup>. Today, cultural critic Jean Baudrillard is an example of a social theorist that builds from such a tradition, emphasizing the absurdity, confusion, and novelty of living in a world where the signifier reigns supreme. Cultural theorist Michel Foucault also had a unique, poststructuralist take on social history, inspiring several variants of cultural criticism. However, all three French public intellectuals were admonished by the academy in some way. Continental philosopher Jacques Derrida was refused a honorary degree from Cambridge University in the 1990s, social theorist Jean Baudrillard continues to only find work at a rogue summer institution in the Swiss alps<sup>16</sup>, and philosopher of culture Michel Foucault was famously criticized by American academic and cultural institutions for being a "good

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<sup>15</sup> As situated by David Richter in his anthology *The Critical Tradition: Classic Texts and Contemporary Trends*.

<sup>16</sup> I am friendly with a New York musician who teaches alongside Jean Baudrillard at the European Graduate School in Switzerland.

philosopher of history, but not a very good historian of philosophy<sup>17</sup>”. It may be the "ethnic turn" of global culture theorist Arjun Appadurai, on the other hand, that is the legacy of today’s hypercapitalist globalization. His cultural theories are simply more practical than French post-structuralism. We are under going a new "great transformation<sup>18</sup>" and we need to address social issues of migration and demography. This may be a reason behind cultural theorist Arjun Appadurai holding a key academic post that we could never imagine Jean Baudrillard holding. The real academic concern at the start of the twenty-first century, however, involves taking steps to bridge esoteric French cultural theory with this type of engaged social *praxis*.

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<sup>17</sup> As musicologist Maria Cizmiciu has reminded me in a cultural theory seminar.

<sup>18</sup> Karl Polanyi, once again.

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