**Culture matters: Comments on Chan’s and Flemmen’s et al. contributions to the field of cultural participation**

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Flemmen, Jarness, and Rosenlund’s contribution is an intense critique of one of Chan and Goldthorpe’s first incursions in the field of cultural consumption. Indeed, in 2005 and 2007, the pair published a series of articles in key journals in which they sought to show that social status was more important than class or income to account for disparities in cultural behaviours (Chan and Goldthorpe 2005; Chan and Goldthorpe 2007b, 2007c). In their view, they rebutted Bourdieu’s homology argument between class and taste but also provided their own spin on the then increasingly trendy notions of omnivores and univores (Peterson and Kern 1996; Peterson and Simkus 1992). Especially their 2007 article in Poetics sparked an interesting debate about which data, measurements and methods to use in order to test the homology thesis but also about how to assess highbrow/ lowbrow participation and omnivorousness (Chan and Goldthorpe 2007a; Peterson 2007; Wuggenig 2007). Since, dust has settled and Chan seems to have carried on developing his own agenda that is visible in his present contribution, which does not really mention the debate about the split between class and status.

Yet, while coming from very different perspectives, there are striking similarities in the general ambition of both contributions. They both want to explore to some extent the links between cultural participation and social stratification. Even if they use very different techniques, they both explore cultural patterns and classify them into clusters as an easier way to account for diversity. Finally, they both show that culture matters, although, in each of these papers, culture never matters in itself. I would like to explore these points in more details now.

1. **Exploring cultural patterns: data and methods**

The approach to measure cultural participation is very different in each contribution. On the one hand, Chan examines a set of 8 indicators from Understanding Society. These 8 items are hard to interpret. In many ways, and maybe with the exception of ‘Carnival or culturally specific festival’, they all are potentially highbrow. The item ‘Rock, pop and jazz’ can have various implications from one individual to another, whether they concentrate on jazz (classically defined as highbrow now) or pop (Hanquinet 2017; Lahire 2006). In addition, research on ‘emerging forms of cultural capital’ has shown that new cultural items have progressively become valorised in the society while being not symbolically accessible to everyone (Friedman et al. 2015; Prieur and Savage 2013). New practices, such as video games or preferences for rap and rock, do also play an essential role in the formation of social class in the UK, alongside traditional highbrow culture such as classical music or museum attendance[[1]](#footnote-1) (Savage et al. 2013). Since these practices are associated with socially unevenly distributed resources, they are distinctive and makes us consider the idea that there might now be different highbrow cultures, which can for instance take a more classic or contemporary outlook. Therefore, street arts can be part of a more emerging form of highbrow culture. In the light of this, I expected a stronger argument for using these flawed measures. However, when using secondary data, it is a known fact that ‘one does what one can with what one has’ and there is always merit in exploiting what is out there.

With regard to Chan’s typology, the univores and paucivores show some engagement with forms of highbrow (museum and jazz) and middlebrow culture. Given the very low number of practices investigated, labelling these groups as univores or paucivores may be misleading as we do not know anything about their other practices and forms of consumption or about the level of cultural engagement. The paucivores, for instance, could support Muhktar and DiMaggio’s (2004) argument that an increasing enthusiasm shown to more contemporary, cosmopolitan forms of culture — in line with the postmodernist tendency— participates in the reconfiguration of cultural capital visible in the popularity of jazz and art museum compared to other performing arts. The third group does definitively show some level of greater openness and, hence, can be used to answer the questions that the article asks. However, I remain dubious that this eclecticism actually reflects omnivorousness. As Peterson wrote, omnnivorousness is ‘the choice of cultural expressions based on distinct aesthetics’ (2007, p. 302) and I am not convinced that this cluster reflects any mixing of different aesthetic repertoires.

In contrast, focusing on the broader concept of ‘lifestyle’ instead of cultural participation, Flemmen et al. logically relied on a very wide range of indicators of tastes and practices. Multiple correspondence analysis (MCA) facilitates the interpretation of the indicators as their meaning emerges from the relationships with others and respect Bourdieu’s principle of relationality (Rouanet, Ackermann, and Le Roux 2000). Going to the art museum, for instance, in itself does not help us much to interpret its social meaning and the values associated with it. It can show a ‘love of art’, a search for new experiences, a classicism, an excuse to see friends, and so on (Hanquinet 2013a, 2013b). It would be erroneous to argue that latent class analysis (LCA) does not enable us to observe some relations between variables, as Chan noted himself (Chan and Goldthorpe 2007a), but, similarly, I do not believe it helps us grasp the various values people associated to their preferences in the way MCA does. The reason is simple; these techniques have very different ambitions. While MCA has often been described as ‘exploratory’[[2]](#footnote-2), LCA presupposes predetermined data modelisation about links between variables; this reduces the field of possibilities (we search the “best” model). It is useful to *test* the presence of omnivores in a specific cultural domain based on clear hypotheses (see López-Sintas and Garcia-Álvarez 2002) but it would be more tricky to use for the unravelling of complex lifestyles (as it can have restrictions in terms of number of variables). Finally, the reliance on groups of omnivores, which, across the literature, often have similar socio-demographics, runs the risks to hide the fluidity of omnivorousness. People can be more omnivorous in one cultural field (music) and less in another (reading) (Hanquinet 2014). This also questions the idea that omnivorousness be a transposable disposition (Lizardo and Skiles 2012).

However, Flemmen and colleagues may have taken too much advantage of the MCA’s flexibility and included too many indicators. They do not provide a clear justification for why questions related to attitudes needed to be added. They could possibly explain people’s lifestyles but do not form a part of them. Similarly, household equipment also brings some incoherence in the cloud of modalities as it does not reveal lifestyles but could arguably be a measure of economic capital, facilitating the demonstration of a homology. Despite this, the cloud of modalities (unfortunately the cloud of individuals is not shown) for the lifestyle space is robust and, combined with a cluster analysis, leads to an interesting typology. As with any factor and cluster analysis, there is scope to discuss the interpretation of the axes and the different classes. For instance, it is still important to highlight that Axis 1 does reveal low levels of cultural engagement (as it does in many other Western countries), even if these lifestyles are not ‘wholly passive’ (as it rarely is provided the questionnaire used is thorough enough, e.g. Bennett et al. 2009). Outlining weak cultural engagement and not only illegitimacy matters since it has been linked to older and less educated cohorts who are more vulnerable to social exclusion and isolation (Callier and Hanquinet 2012). Finally, in a way to handle the large number of indicators, Flemmen et al. end up using six clusters for their test of homology. This reduces the possibility of ‘dissonance’ to Lahire’s term (2006, 2008) between the social space and the lifestyle space. Lahire famously argues that individuals’ cultural profiles are much less coherent than Bourdieu suggested and that a heterogeneous (or dissonant) profile seems to be the most common across all social classes.

1. **Omnivorousness**

Chan’s article seeks to understand the meaning of omnivorousness. Since the apparition of the notion, scholars have indeed debated about its exact meaning (e.g. Gayo 2016) and Chan’s contribution is welcome in shedding new light on this. Through a rather refined analysis of the links between omnivores and different attitudinal measures, Chan argues that omnivores’ affinity with postmaterialist values supports the idea that omnivorousness is the sign of greater tolerance, rather than a new form of cultural distinction. If I am convinced by the demonstration of the first hypothesis, I am more doubtful about why tolerance cannot lead to cultural distinction. Chan recognises that omnivorousness is socially stratified and we should not disregard its distinctive figure simply because people are not especially class- or status-conscious (or refuse to classify themselves along those terms). As Savage argued, individualisation is not contradictory to cultural differentiation and social distinction (Savage 2000:104). Similarly, Fridman and Olliver argued powerfully: ‘Since it is related to a set of socially valorised meanings and that it presupposes access to unevenly distributed cultural, social and economic resources, the appreciation of diversity and of cosmopolitanism lead also, and in an often-unconscious way, to social distinction’ (2004:112 translated by Hanquinet).

In general, I tend to be very wary of the notion of ‘omnivorousness’ as being extremely vague. The problem with Chan’s approach is that it can appear as a monolithic feature that characterizes or not people. As I have argued elsewhere, I am not considering omnivorousness as the cause of greater openness or even an indicator of it. I see omnivorousness as the consequence of the multiplication of cultural boundaries (Hanquinet 2018). Here, I totally agree with Flemmen et al. that, even though still very important, the tension between high and low culture (or legitimate and illegitimate) is only one of the dimensions structuring the space of lifestyles. Their two first axes echoes Bellavance’s conceptual classification (2008) based on two dimensions, an opposition between high and low culture and another one differentiating new and old. This creates four key theoretical configurations of tastes, ‘contemporary’ (high/new), ‘classic’ (high/old), ‘pop’ (low/new) and folk (low/old). High culture does not simply refer to traditional forms of culture (e.g. disposition to appreciate opera or classical music). The picture becomes even more complicated if we also account for other tensions such local versus global, urban versus rural, emotional versus action, which seems suggested in Flemmen et al.’s paper. Therefore, if omnivorousness is ‘boundary-drawing mechanism’ (Lizardo & Skiles 2013) differentiating both horizontally and vertically social groups and their cultural referents, there are many forms of eclecticism and omnivorousness (Bellavance 2008; Ollivier 2008). I am somewhat surprised that these do not emerge more in Flemmen et al.’s typology (they actually barely mention omnivorousness) but this may be an artefact of how they built their clustering, only on 4 dimensions of the MCA, which is a reductive approach.

1. **Status and culture for their own sake?**

Chan’s contribution explores the meaning of omnivorousness by linking it to citizens’ worldviews. This reflects a more explanatory, ‘variable-centred’ approach to culture that form the dependent variable that needs to be ‘explained’, even if, in all fairness, Chan is careful about not using causal terms. In contrast, Flemmen et al. show a greater interest in how cultural forms are organised, following the path opened by scholars like Savage et al. (2005) more than a decade ago. They examine the space of lifestyles, its tensions and powerfully argue for its partial autonomy. Yet, lifestyles are examined here ‘just’ because they are expression of ‘status’. I have three issues with this approach.

First, these cultural divergences that structure the space of lifestyles should be defined as rules at the core of the formation of the embodied cultural capital. However, they perceive them simply as status strategies. They refer to embodied cultural capital but only for the social space and do not operationalise it in terms of lifestyles practices. In their defence, they do suggest that this form of cultural capital could be an expression of status as well but then the homology appear inevitable: status strategies (space of lifestyles) are indeed related to status (embodied cultural capital in the social space). Let me be clear I do think the authors show homology but, in contrast with Chan and Goldthorpe who did present a clear argument for the separate use of status (whether or not one agrees with their approach),Flemmen et al.’s overly complex use of the term make us wonder whether it is useful to put such an emphasis on it when developing a Bourdieu-inspired perspective. Bourdieu had three related notions that most probably involve some symbolic forces but also play different roles in his social theory that unnecessarily disappear here.

Second, if the space of lifestyles indeed represents status divisions and if class and status divisions do operate along similar logics, it is surprising that Bourdieu’s notion of field is completely left out in Flemmen et al.’s contribution while it could have helped to think about the relations between these similar structures. I may be wrong (Bourdieu is notoriously cryptic on this) but I have always interpreted the social space as the field of social classes that encompasses all the other fields.

Finally, Flemmen et al. reduce cultural patterns to strategies of social distinction *only*. As the authors suggest, tastes and cultural behaviours are indeed involved in ‘symbolic boundaries’ (Lamont and Molnár 2002), which seems to me a more interesting perspective on status; however, beyond this, they do tell us about the ‘texture’ of our societies, created through a myriad of different ‘cultures’ that can overlap, coexist or ‘clash’ in various way. Sociologists sometimes struggle to see that cultural diversity matters in itself as well as it matters to other social issues.

1. **Conclusion: Why does culture matter?**

For long, sociologists have repetitively shown that culture matters because it is related to issues of social inequalities and that cultural engagement, and the accumulation of useful cultural capital, are mainly the privilege of (often white) educated middle and upper classes or social status groups (depending on everyone’s tradition). If such perspectives have been welcome and hardly deniable, culture has always been the proxy of something else. I argue there that a focus on people’s cultures, seen as practices, cultural tastes, preferences and activities, is a useful, yet neglected, way to capture diversity, avoiding falling into any preconceptions of class or ethnic cultures, and that we should assess cultural diversity in terms of everyday cultural practices before *asking who does what*. It is time we move away from assumptions of class cultures and, also actually, of ‘intraethnic homology’ (Amin 2002), two forms of homologies which interestingly relate to quite separate bodies of literature. To be clear, I do not deny that lifestyles formation is influenced by class and ethnic belonging, but they are also associated to complex intersections with and between other characteristics, such as gender, class, legal status, or age. As Gilroy suggested (Gilroy 2006:40), it is people’s ‘taste, lifestyle, leisure, preferences’ that divide them, more than racial and ethnic differences. It is only when practices are unravelled that associations with people’s complex social and cultural background and characteristics can be investigated. It is the only way to assess the extent to which people live together and interact, pending that our measurement tools are encompassing enough and use geographically- and ethno-religious specific cultural referents to avoid a Eurocentric approach of cultural capital.

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1. Evidence continues to support the idea that museums attract more the socio-economically privileged:

   https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\_data/file/664933/Adult\_stats\_release\_4.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Even if no technique is never *per se* exploratory (Le Roux and Rouanet 2004). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)