

SOCIAL CLASS AND ARTS CONSUMPTION:

The Origins and Consequences of Class Differences in Exposure to the Arts in America*

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The last decade has witnessed a burgeoning of American high culture. The number of museums and theaters has increased, the number of orchestras, opera companies, and dance companies has skyrocketed, and attendance at all of them is up.¹ Ironically, however, the upsurge in public enthusiasm has been accompanied by financial tension. Earnings from admission and ticket prices have risen far less quickly than expenses, traditional patrons have been unable or unwilling to bridge the gap, and inherently labor-intensive production systems, inflation, energy costs, urban fiscal crises, and constraints on ticket and admission fees promise to make the situation worse.² The effect of this fiscal malaise has been to involve the government — federal, state, and municipal — in American high culture to a degree unprecedented in this country. In twelve years the National Endowment for the Arts' budget has grown from \$3 million to \$96 million, the number of state arts agencies has increased from 18 to 55, and the number of local arts councils has expanded from 175 to 900.³

Not surprisingly, financial exigency and government involvement in funding has heightened interest in the composition of arts publics. Criticized by civil-rights groups and radicals as elitist, and exhorted by government agencies and some members of their own ranks to serve a cross-section of the public, managers of arts institutions have recently undertaken hesitant efforts to broaden their traditionally high-status audiences to include racial minorities and white-collar and blue-collar workers. Such efforts, however, have met

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with some resistance from traditional patrons, boards of trustees, and existing arts audiences.⁴ Elements of these conflicts stem from aesthetic considerations, but differences over important aspects of the production and distribution of art derive primarily, in our view, from the role of culture in the American political economy. Just as conflict over the content and distribution of education cannot be understood apart from the relation of schooling to the occupational structure, so conflict over the appropriate public for the arts cannot be understood without reference to the social role of culture in an advanced capitalist society.

The purpose of this paper is to contribute to the development of a theory of the political economy of culture in the United States. While cultural production and cultural consumption are intimately related aspects of a cultural system, our focus here is on the latter.⁵ Specifically, we will examine the origins and consequences of the unequal consumption of the arts in America. The discussion is informed by the results of approximately 230 studies of the consumers of visual and performing arts in this country. Few of these studies have been published, and their acquisition necessitated direct contact with more than 1,200 arts organizations. The studies we assembled include virtually all major surveys of actual and potential arts consumers conducted in the United States since 1961. Using the results of these studies, we develop four provisional propositions explaining the sources and functions of variant class consumption rates. These propositions find suggestive support in available evidence, but additional data will be required to fully elaborate and validate the propositions.

SOCIAL CLASS AND ARTS CONSUMPTION

Families of different social classes differ in the content and form of their socialization practices. It is well known, for instance, that adult political attitudes are shaped by the family during childhood and adolescence. This intergenerational reproduction of cultural interests is likely to extend to aesthetic tastes as well.⁶ Thus, once social classes evolve distinctive cultural preferences, family socialization will be a powerful mechanism in ensuring that such class-related artistic traditions are maintained from generation to generation. In addition, the strong relationship between family social class and the level and quality of formal education will further reinforce the process of cultural reproduction.⁷ Schooling, particularly higher education, by virtue of both the opportunities it affords for introduction to "high culture" and its diffuse emphasis on aesthetic experience, is likely to be an important determinant of artistic taste. Since exposure to education is, to a considerable extent, a function of social class origins, education is therefore

also likely to contribute to the class differentiation of arts consumption. These considerations would lead one to expect that intergenerational “cultural mobility,” like social mobility, will be relatively restricted. They also suggest that education, independent of class origin, should have a major bearing on individual propensity to consume one art form or another.

These factors help explain intergenerational class continuity in arts consumption patterns, but they do not account for the emergence of distinct class-related aesthetic tastes. Though pertinent evidence is scant, it would appear that both historical and social-structural factors play a major role in determining class-specific cultural interests.⁸ To the extent that social classes experience highly divergent social circumstances and patterns of historical development, one would expect distinctive class cultures, and therefore aesthetic interests, to emerge. Yet, the United States has never had the discrete class cultures that characterized nineteenth-century British society. Moreover, the advent of mechanical reproduction of art,⁹ the distribution of culture through a national marketing system, and the confounding of distinctive tastes as a result of market-segmentation strategies by culture-producing organizations¹⁰ have resulted in a tendency for culture interests to diffuse across class lines. Various studies have shown that, while class position and cultural preferences are closely linked, other factors, including ethnicity, region, and age, cross-cut and thereby weaken the class-culture linkage.¹¹

Nonetheless, to the extent that classes and class fractions do possess characteristic cultural consumption patterns, their possession becomes a convenient instrument for class identification. Goffman noted in an early article that such symbolic behaviors

provide the cue that is used in order to discover the status of others and, from this, the way in which others are to be treated.... [They] frequently express the whole mode of life of those from whom the symbolic act originates. In this way the individual finds that the structure of his experience in one sphere of life is repeated throughout his experiences in other spheres of life. Affirmation of this kind induces solidarity in the group and richness and depth in the psychic life of its members¹²

Thus, the adoption of artistic interests, tastes, standards, and activities associated with a social class helps establish an individual’s membership in that class. A person whose occupational position signifies a certain class standing but whose cultural preferences indicate otherwise may well be excluded from the class’s social community. Conversely, the individual whose occupation does not connote membership in a given class but whose artistic taste does may make a legitimate claim of at least marginal membership.

Thus, community studies commonly reveal that cultural style, including appropriate interests in the arts, often serve as a convenient class cue, especially among the upper class whose cultural systems are particularly well elaborated. For instance, as Veblen observed long ago, inherited wealth or an elite occupation does not in itself serve as a sufficient credential for admission to the dominant fraction of the class; access is also predicated upon the adoption of an acceptable set of values and life styles.¹³ Similarly, occupationally declassé families often continue successfully to assert upper-class identity through the maintenance of an upper-class cultural style.

One implication of this intimate association between social class and culture is that the distribution of artistic consumption is likely to be a part of class politics in much the same way as is the distribution of education. The upper class can be expected to make efforts to exclude other classes from acquiring its artistic interests as a means of preserving elite boundaries and dominance from generation to generation. At the same time, as a strategy for gaining access to the positions, economic resources, and social community of the upper class, individual members of other classes, especially the upper-middle class, are likely to strive to acquire the cultural style necessary for upward mobility. Enrollment in elite universities and cultivation of “high brow” artistic tastes are both means for achieving this end.¹⁴

CLASS DIFFERENCES IN HIGH-ARTS CONSUMPTION

If divergent class experiences and cultural traditions generate divergent artistic preferences, if these preferences are sustained from one generation to the next by the family and the educational system, and if the class hierarchy results in efforts by the upper class to limit access to its cultural forms, then the consumption of the high arts should vary sharply by class. The high arts, including fine art, opera, ballet, modern dance, theater, and classical music, are likely to be heavily consumed by members of the upper-middle and upper class and to be consumed with decreasing frequency as one descends the class hierarchy. (The upper-middle and upper classes include those who own substantial property, occupy middle and upper level managerial positions in business corporations, or are employed in the professions, for example, health practitioners, teachers, artists, architects, social workers, lawyers, and the like. Also included are the immediate relatives of those holding such wealth, positions, or occupations.) The expected gradient in class consumption is indeed observed in a 1975 national cross-sectional survey conducted by the National Research Center of the Arts.¹⁵ Though occupational breakdowns are unavailable in this study, two variables closely related to occupation — education and income — are strongly related to the likelihood of high-arts exposure (Table 1). Fewer than a quarter of those with less than a high-school

TABLE 1

Consumption of Seven Cultural Forms:
Percentage Consumed During Previous Twelve Months, by Education and Income, 1975

	Art Museum	Theater	Classical Music	Science Museum	Book Reading	Cinema	Popular Music
<i>Education</i>							
< H.S. Graduate (A)	20	18	23	17	26	56	25
< College Graduate	44	44	50	34	46	75	41
College Graduate (B)	78	73	77	59	60	85	40
Education gap (B-A)	58	55	47	42	34	29	15
<i>Income</i>							
< \$5,000 (C)	20	17	9	12	29	46	21
\$5,000-10,000	37	32	11	32	43	68	34
\$10,000-15,000	39	41	15	32	43	76	32
< \$15,000 (D)	59	57	27	45	49	82	45
Income gap (D-C)	39	40	18	33	20	36	24

Source: National Research Center of the Arts, *Americans and the Arts* (New York, 1976), pp. 77, 79, 81, 82, 84, 86, 118.

education report attending an art museum during the previous twelve months, while over three quarters of the college-educated indicate a visit. Similarly, 20 percent of those earning less than \$5,000 annual income had visited an art museum compared with 59 percent among those with incomes in excess of \$15,000. Comparable differences in attendance rates by education and income are observed for the theater and classical music. By contrast, class gradients are substantially less for the consumption of cultural forms not considered high art – books, movies, and popular music.

Occupation proves to be a comparably strong predictor of high-arts exposure, according to a cross-sectional study of twelve major U.S. cities conducted in the early 1970s.¹⁶ The exposure rate of five occupational groups to seven cultural forms during the previous year is displayed in Table 2. The theater

TABLE 2

Consumption of Seven Cultural Forms:
Percentage Consumed During the Previous Twelve Months, by Occupation, for Twelve Metropolitan Areas in 1973

	<i>Theater</i>	<i>Symphony</i>	<i>Opera</i>	<i>Ballet</i>	<i>Broadway Musical</i>	<i>Jazz, Folk, Rock</i>	<i>Cinema</i>
<i>Managerial</i>	24	14	6	4	27	26	75
<i>Professional</i>	28	18	5	9	25	33	83
<i>Teachers</i>	35	27	10	11	36	28	84
<i>Other White</i>							
<i>Collar</i>	19	11	4	5	23	28	75
<i>Blue Collar</i>	10	4	1	2	11	20	63

Source: Ford Foundation, *The Finances of the Performing Arts*, 2 vols. (New York, 1974), p. 13.

was attended by 24 percent of the managers and 28 percent of the professionals, while 19 percent of the white-collar workers (excluding teachers) and only 10 percent of the blue-collar workers were theater goers. Parallel occupational differences are evident for exposure to symphony, opera, and ballet performances. Again, class differences are seen to be substantially less or even non-existent in the case of more popular arts forms, such as musicals, jazz, and the cinema. One white-collar group, teachers, consume the high arts at a rate which far exceeds that of other white-collar groups and even managers and professionals. Otherwise, it is apparent that exposure to the high arts is a direct function of occupational status. Consistent with the general thesis on social class and arts consumption, frequency of exposure to the high arts is also found to be class stratified.¹⁷

The differential class consumption and frequency of exposure to the high arts results in an upper-middle and upper-class dominance of actual arts audiences. In New York State, for instance, 55 percent of the theater audience in 1973 was either managerial or professional, while only 2 percent were blue-collar labor; the comparable percentages are 51 and 1 for symphonic music, 65 and 1 for opera, 62 and 2 for ballet, and 43 and 2 for art museums.¹⁸ An earlier study of the audiences of a national sample of performing-arts organizations – theaters, major symphonies, opera, ballet and ensembles – revealed similar compositions for the nation as a whole. More than three quarters of the audience for all of the high art forms studied were managerial or professional, while blue-collar labor's representation never exceeded one-twentieth.¹⁹ It is evident, then, that the rate of exposure to the arts in America sharply varies by social class. Whatever symbolic capital can be derived from the appropriation of high culture is, consequently, largely restricted to the upper-middle and upper classes.

EDUCATION AND ARTS CONSUMPTION

It is apparent that the relationship between class and exposure to the visual and performing arts is pronounced, whether class is defined in terms of income, education, or occupation. However, one seemingly anomalous pattern is the consumption rate of teachers, which consistently exceeds the exposure of managers and other professionals of higher class position. This might be explained by the fact that teachers in the aggregate have a higher level of education than managers; furthermore, teachers may be a “curator group”²⁰ more directly concerned with cultural matters than are other professionals. Whatever the explanation, this pattern suggests that education may be a more salient determinant of arts consumption than other social-class dimensions.

This possibility can be examined by considering the joint exposure rates by education and income or occupation. Data on the education-income distribution are presented in Table 3 for consumption in seven areas in twelve cities during 1973. The population cross-sections are separated into high- and low-income groupings (\$15,000 is the dividing point) and high- and low-education sectors (with college graduation as the dividing line). Education is clearly a better independent predictor of exposure to the four elite art forms – theater, symphony, opera, and ballet – than is income. Thus, within income levels, the percentage difference in theater exposure rates between low- and high-education levels is 22 or more, whereas the difference between income groups within education levels is 11 percent or less. Similar patterns characterize the other high arts, but the income and educational variables assume

TABLE 3

Consumption of Seven Cultural Forms:
Percentage Consumed During the Previous Twelve Months, by Education and Occupation
Among Those Aged 20 or Older, for Twelve Metropolitan Areas in 1973

	<i>Theater</i>			<i>Symphony</i>					
	Low Ed. ^a	High Ed.	Diff.	Low Ed.	High Ed.	Diff.			
<i>Low income</i> ^b	10	35	25	5	24	19			
<i>High income</i>	21	43	22	12	28	16			
<i>Difference</i>	11	8		7	4				
	<i>Opera</i>			<i>Ballet</i>					
	Low Ed.	High Ed.	Diff.	Low Ed.	High Ed.	Diff.			
<i>Low income</i>	2	10	8	2	12	10			
<i>High income</i>	5	12	7	4	14	10			
<i>Difference</i>	3	2		2	2				
	<i>Broadway Musicals</i>			<i>Jazz, Rock and Folk</i>			<i>Cinema</i>		
	Low Ed.	High Ed.	Diff.	Low Ed.	High Ed.	Diff.	Low Ed.	High Ed.	Diff.
<i>Low income</i>	12	32	20	17	31	14	58	80	22
<i>High income</i>	24	46	22	28	30	2	80	82	2
<i>Difference</i>	12	14		11	-1		22	2	

Source: Ford Foundation, *The Finances of the Performing Arts*, 2 vols. (New York, 1974), pp. 14-16.

^aLess than college graduation.

^bAnnual family incomes less than \$15,000.

nearly identical importance for the popular cultural forms, particularly jazz, folk, or rock music and movies. For these areas, increments in education or income appear to produce approximately equivalent increases in rates of cultural consumption.

These findings on the importance of education over income in determining consumption of the high arts are corroborated in a national cross-sectional study of urban and suburban dwellers conducted in 1964-65. Gruenberg found that high income, education, and occupational standing are all associated with a tendency to devote leisure time to attending concerts, plays, museums, and fairs.²¹ However, when all three of these factors are considered

simultaneously (through multiple regression), only education and occupational standing independently predict this use of leisure time, with education being the stronger predictor of the two. Thus, it can be seen that although income may have an independent impact on the likelihood of high-arts consumption in some cases, education and, to a lesser degree, occupation are more powerfully related to exposure.

THE ORIGINS AND CONSEQUENCES OF CLASS CULTURES

We will develop tentative explanations for the social origins and consequences of these observed class differences in cultural consumption patterns in the form of four working propositions. These propositions elaborate the earlier discussion of the origins and inter-generational maintenance of class differences in aesthetic taste. The first two concern the relative accessibility of the arts to individuals from different social classes. The third is related to the symbolic functions that high art serves for elite groups as collectivities. The final proposition concerns the uses to which familiarity with cultural forms may be put in facilitating social mobility.

1. Arts Appreciation is Trained

Appreciation of and familiarity with the high arts is a trained capacity, with access to this training unequally distributed among social classes. Artistic meaning is encoded in works of art: works that appeared jarring and inharmonious at their inception, for instance the paintings of the impressionists or the musical compositions of Debussy and Stravinsky, may seem natural and harmonious to a generation that has assimilated the conventions implicit in them. Individuals must learn to “read” a painting or a piece of music just as they must learn to read the printed word. Indeed, as Pierre Bourdieu notes, a work of art “only exists as such for a person who has the means to appropriate it, or in other words, to decipher it.”²² And, as with the printed word, individuals born or raised in visually or musically sophisticated families are greatly advantaged. In the case of the high arts, the corresponding cultural codes are most strongly established and cultivated in the upper and upper-middle classes, particularly certain professional sectors and old-line patrician fractions. For the latter, high-arts consumption is a matter of unconscious deciphering with an ease that is rooted in prolonged family socialization into the world of elite culture. In the absence of such a family background, others can self-consciously though sometimes awkwardly acquire the necessary training through other means, particularly schooling. Still others, lacking either appropriate family background or educational experiences, remain deprived of the means for appropriating the high arts throughout their lives.

If this proposition is correct, we would expect exposure to the high arts to be distributed unequally by education, both because individuals gain familiarity with elite cultural traditions in educational settings and because individuals with high educational levels come disproportionately from upper- and upper-middle-class families.²³ We have already seen that such inequalities are strikingly evident and that educational inequalities are apparently more pronounced than other class inequalities in high arts consumption. Moreover, we have also seen that education is a critical predictor of consumption of the high arts but not the popular arts, suggesting that schooling is only important for deciphering the more esoteric codes of the former.

A possible alternative explanation — that differential consumption is chiefly the product of greater disposable incomes of the highly educated — is not supported by available evidence. Baumol and Bowen, for instance, found that the proportion of blue-collar workers is comparably low in all seat categories, regardless of price, and that there is little or no association between ticket price and audience educational composition for the performing arts.²⁴ Similarly, even when the cost of attendance is very low, education strongly differentiates the likelihood of participation. In a 1972 survey of a cross-section of New York residents, respondents were asked whether they would pay \$3 to see an assortment of cultural offerings. The college educated were no more willing than those with only a high-school education to attend the popular arts, such as a circus, rock concert, school dramatic show, puppet show, or exhibit of arts and crafts by local people; however, despite the very modest price barrier, the college educated were far more inclined to consume the high arts forms, such as an exhibit of famous paintings, ballet or modern dance, an orchestra rehearsal, or a play.²⁵

The unequal possession of cultural codes by educational groups is also suggested by attendance rates at art museums versus science and history museums. Here the effect of context (museum) is held constant, while the requirement of high-cultural decoding capacities is not. In cross-sections of both national and New York state populations, education is found to be a stronger predictor for art museum attendance than for science and history museum visits.²⁶ Finally, perceptions of barriers to the appropriation of high culture — the extent to which individuals consider the arts comprehensible and interesting — also vary sharply by educational level.²⁷

2. Arts Appreciation is Contextual

Appreciation and understanding of the high arts is related to the context in which they are presented, and the context is generally more familiar to the

upper-middle and upper classes than to others. Boundaries can be erected not only by codes inherent in the work of art itself, but also by the social context of appropriation: the kind of setting within which the work appears or is performed, the relationship between the setting and other settings of everyday life, the rules which govern presentation of self and interaction with other arts consumers, and the degree of access to information about performances and exhibitions. Bernstein has suggested that structural and interactional properties of pedagogy and curricular organization in formal schooling play a critical role in the intergenerational reproduction of class cultures and behavioral styles.²⁸ The context of schooling presents subtle barriers for the poor and working class, and it is likely that comparable contextual barriers are present in formal cultural settings as well. It would seem reasonable, then, to anticipate that the social settings and ambience of high-art presentations in American society are more familiar to, and comfortable for, the upper-middle and upper classes than other sectors, and that this further accentuates differential class participation rates.

If this thesis is correct, it is expected, for instance, that open-air arts performances would obtain a more diverse audience than regular performances. Physical features (e.g., decor, seating patterns) and interactional rules (e.g., posture, nonverbal interaction with companions, regulation of talk during performances) are likely to be more alienating to the poor and working class in traditional performance halls than in open-air settings. Indeed, outdoor audiences are generally found to be somewhat more representative of the local public than are traditional indoor audiences for the same art form. Baumol and Bowen report that high-culture outdoor performances attract audiences with a lower median family income (\$9,400 compared with \$12,300), less education, and greater proportions of blue-collar workers (though still not exceeding 10 percent) than indoor performances.²⁹ Also consistent with this finding is survey evidence from New York state indicating that the level of discomfort experienced in high-culture settings varies with education level.³⁰

3. Arts Consumption Enhances Class Cohesion

Participation in high arts activities builds social solidarity among those who participate. Since, according to the previous propositions, high arts are primarily the preserve of the upper and upper-middle classes, *differential class exposure rates to the high arts has the effect of reinforcing class cohesion.*

Class solidarity rests on both social and ideological cohesion. Social cohesion exists when class members are united by networks of acquaintanceship,

friendship, and inter-marriage. Ideological cohesion is present when class members share common political and social perspectives and values. The maintenance of both forms of class solidarity requires the erection of barriers of inclusion and exclusion: members of the cohesive group must have their ideological and social unity continuously reinforced, and non-members must be excluded from sharing in either.³¹ Schooling, especially higher education, plays a central role in uniting the upper-middle and upper classes and dividing them from other classes,³² and exposure to the arts may play a similar role.

The American upper-middle and upper classes do not constitute, of course, a homogeneous entity, but are themselves divided into distinct fractions. Among the more important cleavages are those between professionals, established wealthy families, and new corporate executives. Just as the line dividing these groups from the remainder of the society must be continuously maintained, so also must be the internal distinctions between these groups. This elite differentiation often gives rise, as Weber³³ would have predicted, to intense status struggles, accompanied by a search by each stratum for symbols that can distinguish it from the immediately subordinate stratum. Educational credentials have become a major instrument in this struggle: college graduation unites the upper-middle and upper classes, while the reputation of the undergraduate college and the stature of post-graduate education provide the refined distinctions necessary for the assertion of intra-elite status differences.³⁴ An individual's educational credentials are relatively fixed during his or her lifetime, however, and the educational system is slow to change. Cultural taste, by contrast, is subject to rapidly changing definition, and it thus provides a convenient supplementary instrument for asserting refined status distinctions on a short-term basis. As Gouldner has written, a highly developed aesthetic orientation provides "a way in which men who are wealthy and powerful may legitimate their superiority and assert themselves as worthy, marking themselves off as a deserving elite from those who are merely wealthy and powerful."³⁵

Groups commonly establish social and ideological cohesion through collective participation in ritual occasions, and attendance at arts events provides such an opportunity. Following Bernstein,³⁶ we can define a ritual as an event whose functions are to create an attachment to, and respect for, a group and to foster detachment and distance from other groups. It is evident that many arts activities effectively incorporate these functions. They involve rituals of inclusion, celebrating the shared culture of the elect, and rituals of exclusion, celebrating distinction on the basis of cultivated aesthetic instincts and sensitivity to fashion. Ideological unity is thereby reinforced, and the class homogeneity of the participants ensures that social unity is also perpetuated. As one analyst noted in a study of a theater audience, the upper-middle and

upper classes are afforded an opportunity to express their mutual social comfort as they gather for a performance, for “theater-going is a status-maintaining activity simply because it is primarily attended by one’s peers. One never sits next to an unwashed laborer or hears poor grammar . . . or profanity, all of which are common enough in wrestling matches. Conversely, lower status groups consider live theater to be ‘off limits’ or at least not worth the money or potential embarrassment.”³⁷ One consequence is that gathering at certain arts events frequently becomes prescribed behavior within groups defining such events as “their” ritual occasion. Attendance at the Friday afternoon concerts of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, for example, has long been regarded as an obligation of the Boston social elite.³⁸ Another consequence is that the upper-middle and upper classes are more sensitive to fashions in the art world than are other groups, since failure to express tastes current within elite circles can suggest a marginal relation to such networks. Thus, in the study of New York state art consumers, for instance, college graduates were more likely than the less educated to suggest that art museums and shows should be frequently visited in order to keep abreast of the newest work in visual arts.³⁹ There may be more than a grain of truth in Veblen’s sardonic comment that the

cultivation of the aesthetic faculty requires time and application, and the demands made upon the gentleman in this direction therefore tend to change his life of leisure into a more or less arduous application to the business of learning how to live a life of ostensible leisure in a becoming way. . . .⁴⁰

As Goblot put it, the “bourgeoisie took up art in order to make a barrier of it.”⁴¹

Highly refined distinctions characterize status-defining institutions, of course, and participation in policy-making and advisory bodies of local arts institutions is perhaps the mark of greatest distinction. The rosters of the boards of directors and policy committees of arts organizations draw heavily on established wealthy families, and the work of these bodies further unifies and sets apart this fraction of the local upper class.⁴² Thus, membership on the board of directors of the Philadelphia Orchestra, according to a study of that organization, has signified acceptance into the Philadelphia social elite and has been “from its inception a leading index of upper class membership, social recognition, and exclusivity.”⁴³

The opportunity that arts audience participation can provide for identification with the upper class may be one reason for the particularly intense consumption by the upper-middle class. The Ford Foundation cross-sectional

study of twelve major U.S. cities revealed, for instance, that professionals and teachers more frequently attended performing arts events than any other occupational groups, including business managers and executives. The symphony had been attended by 27 percent of the teachers and 18 percent of the professionals during the year prior to the survey; by contrast, 14 percent of the businessmen, 11 percent of the lower white-collar occupations, and only 4 percent of the blue-collar workers had attended a concert (see Table 2). Similarly, a national survey demonstrated that high arts consumption was most intense among those holding highly prestigious occupations but relatively low incomes, leading the analyst to conclude that it is particularly among “people whose status is most tenuous vis-à-vis the economically powerful” that “frequent participation in cultural activities may be seen as an attempt to maintain a high prestige position.”⁴⁴ Lacking wealth or positions of real influence of its own, the upper-middle class can assert symbolic identification with the rich and powerful by participating in the solidarity ritual of the arts occasion. Cultural capital provides access to a social status that is otherwise unavailable.

If consumption of the high arts is often undertaken by members of the upper-middle and upper classes for purposes of status maintenance, it can be speculated that they will place special emphasis on consumption in collective rather than individual settings. Private listening to recorded opera obviously cannot bestow the element of elite inclusion that comes with presence in the audience of a performance by a major opera company. It can also be anticipated that a degree of disinterest in the intrinsic aesthetic content of the art form will be especially evident among those drawn to the arts primarily out of concern for acquiring identification with the elite.

4. Arts Consumption is a Form of Cultural Capital

Fractions of the upper and upper-middle class that lack economic capital will accumulate cultural capital as an alternative strategy for maintaining and advancing their position in the class structure. The possession of refined cultural tastes can serve as an alternative to the possession of wealth and corporate power for asserting high status within the elite. While the most salient variety of cultural capital is the educational credential, familiarity with the arts is also useful in gaining acceptance into elite circles. Thus, cultural capital can be transformed into the social capital of acquaintances and connections, and social capital can in turn be used to accumulate economic capital.⁴⁵

This proposition leads to the expectation that consumption of the arts should

be highest among fractions of the upper and upper-middle classes most lacking in economic resources. Specifically, cultural capital is most likely to be sought by teachers, media professionals, intellectuals, and, to a lesser extent, doctors and lawyers. In fact these groups are strongly over-represented among arts consumers. The Ford Foundation study⁴⁶ of major cities found that teachers exhibit the highest consumption rate of any major occupational group (Table 2). Similarly, Baumol and Bowen⁴⁷ discovered that professional-technical females were over-represented in performing arts audiences by a ratio of 4.5 and men by a ratio of 5.0; the female and male ratios for managers are 1.9 and 1.7, while for clerical sales personnel the ratio is 0.5 and 0.8, and for blue-collar workers 0.05 and 0.05. Unfortunately, these data leave unclear the extent to which the differential rates reflect mobility strategies rather than simply the consequences of different aesthetic tastes and status concerns in different occupational and educational strata.

If familiarity with the arts, as one component of cultural capital, can be converted to social and economic capital, it is also expected that some families will undertake to bestow cultural capital on their children as a means of enhancing their prospects for upward social and economic mobility. Culturally affluent but economically modest families, most commonly found in the upper-middle class, are thus likely to be particularly concerned with ensuring that their cultural resources are inherited. And, increasingly, as changes in the structure of corporate enterprise enhance the importance of educational and other cultural credentials for achieving leadership positions, managers can be expected to make efforts to convert a fraction of their economic capital into cultural capital for their children. The children may later use this cultural capital to facilitate rapid ascent through the corporate hierarchy, thus reconverting it to economic capital.⁴⁸

A proper test of this proposition would require data relating an individual's cultural socialization and economic position to his or her parents' cultural and economic resources, but such data are unavailable. Several pieces of evidence, however, are suggestive. First, those with higher educational levels place greater emphasis on instilling artistic interests in children than do the more poorly educated. In New York state, for instance, the college educated more often than the poorly educated endorse the value of taking one's children to various high-arts events and the value of arts instruction in public schools.⁴⁹

Second, indirect evidence suggests that parents act on these values. If an individual's educational level can be considered an approximate guide to his or her parents' education, it is found that those from more educated backgrounds were more likely than others to have been exposed to the arts at an

early age. In a national survey, the percentages of the college-educated who attended a play, art museum, classical-music performance, ballet or dance performance, or opera before the age of twenty were 82, 82, 67, 48, and 35, respectively; by contrast, the corresponding figures for those with less than a high school diploma are 48, 40, 25, 14, and 8.⁵⁰

Finally, it is also known that early exposure to the high arts is associated with strong adult interests in cultural affairs. Those who attended plays, classical music concerts, art museums, ballet and dance, and opera before they were twenty are significantly more likely than others to consume the same form as an adult. Moreover, they are also more likely to be frequent consumers.⁵¹ It appears, then, that there is considerable intergenerational continuity in cultural interests, and that culturally endowed families take an active role in ensuring that their cultural assets are bestowed on their children. Direct evidence is lacking, however, on whether this form of cultural capital is frequently converted into social influence and economic position.

CONCLUSION

As anticipated, the rate of consumption of the high arts in the United States varies significantly by social class. Available studies repeatedly and consistently demonstrate that the ranks of those who attend museums and theater, opera, symphony and ballet performances are dominated by the wealthy and well-educated, most of whom are professionals and managers. Blue collar workers and those with little education are virtually absent. By contrast, the popular arts, such as jazz, rock music, and the cinema, are consumed at comparable rates by all social classes. Of the several class dimensions examined, education appears to be the most salient determinant of arts involvement. What is more, highly educated groups, particularly teachers and other professionals, are sharply over-represented among regular arts consumers. Such patterns are not unique to the United States; they have been found in other advanced capitalist societies as well, including Canada, France, England, and the Netherlands.⁵²

An interpretation of the origins and consequences of varying class rates of cultural consumption requires that we look beyond the arts themselves and focus on the dynamics of class reproduction, that is, the processes by which classes and class fractions compete for societal and cultural dominance and for control over resources. Variant class patterns of cultural consumption are not simply a matter of arbitrary differences in taste. Differences are related to elements of the class structure, we have argued, and they endure because variant cultural socialization patterns shape aesthetic taste, reinforce elite

cohesion, and provide a means for fractions of the upper and upper-middle classes to defend or advance their relative standing in the cultural and social hierarchy.

Several aspects of the argument developed in this paper are in particular need of further elaboration and study. First, more refined data and analyses are required for assessing the relative importance of education and occupation in determining arts consumption patterns. Second, the relative strength of home and school in imparting the capacity to decode art should be identified. Third, the importance of artistic context in discouraging attendance by non-elite strata is in need of empirical assessment. Fourth, an analysis of the ritual functions of the high arts requires further specification: the precise character of these functions probably differs among various fractions of the upper-middle and upper classes, and may differ among communities. Finally, an elaboration of the role of cultural capital in social and economic mobility requires careful analysis, using more refined data on the actual cultural investments families make in their children and the consequences of these for their children's mobility.

Ultimately, however, the general thesis suggested here would predict an inexact fit at best between any set of class predictors and actual cultural participation. The barriers created by the lack of a family-socialized ability to decode art and by unfamiliarity with arts contexts (propositions one and two) can be transcended and some individuals do transcend them; these barriers will reduce the frequency of arts attendance by lower-status people but they cannot eliminate it. Class ritual functions (proposition three) can be expected to differ somewhat from community to community on the basis of variant occupational structures and unique cultural histories; certain groups will be included in the solidarity rituals in some communities but excluded in others. Indeed, since the sharpness of class boundaries exhibits a considerable range in advanced capitalist societies, we would also anticipate that the value of the arts for reinforcing cohesion among the national elites will vary from country to country. Families and individuals may embrace the arts in the interest of cultural and, ultimately, social mobility (proposition four), but they will do so according to different strategies and to different degrees; though many upper-middle class families invest in cultural education, some place their resources elsewhere. And, finally, arts participation is still, to a considerable extent, a matter of personal taste. Social-structural factors shape taste and present different opportunities and rewards for the cultural choices of different kinds of people, yet their effect is not absolute.

The political economy of art is closely linked to the political economy of education and both must be treated as part of a general analysis of the role of

culture. The political economy of education is far better developed than that of art, and many of the approaches used to analyze education hold promise for understanding the arts as well. Yet there are limits to this application, for the roles of art and education in the social structure are similar but not identical. Because there are a limited number of elite positions in the economy and educational credentials are used as a screening device for filling them, the relationship between education and the class system is relatively tight. Establishing an institution functionally equivalent to schools in placing people in the occupational structure would require a massive societal reorganization. By contrast, the arts are much more loosely articulated with the economic structure;⁵³ and widespread demand for high culture can be more readily satisfied than can widespread demand for credentials from elite colleges or universities. Moreover, functional equivalents for the arts as boundary-setters for elite groups can be devised with minimal shock to the social order. Indeed, they already exist. Thus, future work should assume no exact analogy between the role of arts and education in American society; the similarities, complementarities, and differences between these two realms of culture all deserve detailed analysis.

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