

Pierre Bourdieu

Marion Desmartin



84

Rich And Poor or the Two Christmas Dinners, photo Bettmann/Corbis/Contrasto

In the Père Lachaise cemetery of Paris, alongside the gravestone of Brillat-Savarin, another bears the name of Pierre Bourdieu (1930-2002). The proximity of the sociologist named on the stone may appear anything but a coincidence, not due to the initial B of the name but to a book published by him in 1979 with the title *La distinction*. Dedicated to consumption and its classification, the study was the result of a survey and provided a method of analysis of the different styles of food of

the French social classes, what Brillat-Savarin would have generically defined as ‘le goût’ (taste), referring naturally enough to the gourmets he associated with: magistrates, doctors, academics and a few aristocrats assimilated by the bourgeoisie.

An imaginary dialogue between the graves in a hypothetical Spoon River cemetery or a brief biography of both the deceased would be simple expedients, but would inevitably end up floundering in pastiche. It is more effec-

tive, I believe, to quote directly *La distinction*, in which the ‘physiology of taste’ is transformed into the analysis of consumption, without losing its role as an intellectual tool thanks to which society may discover its own cultural values and recognize itself in them. In other words, not the fake voice of Pierre Bourdieu but his written word, which — even outside a cemetery — has a perennial quality. As for the ear of Brillat-Savarin, interred ‘next-door’, we would have to consider him deaf, if our cult for his grave did not attribute to him a sensitivity and an intelligence far superior to that of anyone who has never reread his *Physiology*:

There is an economy of cultural goods, but it has a specific logic. Sociology endeavours to establish the conditions in which the consumers of cultural goods, and their taste for them, are produced, and at the same time to describe the different ways of appropriating such of these objects as are regarded at a particular moment as works of art, and the social conditions of the constitution of the mode of appropriation that is considered legitimate. But one cannot fully understand cultural practices unless ‘culture’, in the restricted, normative sense of ordinary usage, is brought back into ‘culture’ in the anthropological sense, and the elaborated taste for the most refined objects is reconnected with the elementary taste for the flavours of food.

Whereas the ideology of charisma regards taste in legitimate culture as a gift of nature, scientific observation shows that cultural needs are the product of upbringing and education: sur-

veys establish that all cultural practices (museum visits, concert-going, reading etc.), and preferences in literature, painting or music, are closely linked to educational level (measured by qualifications or length of schooling) and secondarily to social origin. The relative weight of home background and of formal education (the effectiveness and duration of which are closely dependent on social origin) varies according to the extent to which the different cultural practices are recognized and taught by the educational system, and the influence of social origin is strongest—other things being equal—in ‘extra-curricular’ and avant-garde culture. To the socially recognized hierarchy of the arts, and within each of them, of genres, schools or periods, corresponds a social hierarchy of the consumers. This predisposes tastes to function as markers of ‘class’. The manner in which culture has been acquired lives on in the manner of using it [...]

Through the economic and social conditions which they presuppose, the different ways of relating to realities and fictions, of believing in fictions and the realities they simulate, with more or less distance and detachment, are very closely linked to the different possible positions in social space and, consequently, hound up with the systems of dispositions (habitus) characteristic of the different classes and class fractions. Taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier. Social subjects, classified by their classifications, distinguish themselves by the distinctions they make, between the beautiful and the ugly, the distinguished and the vulgar, in which their position in the objective classifica-

tions is expressed or betrayed. And statistical analysis does indeed show that oppositions similar in structure to those found in cultural practices also appear in eating habits. The antithesis between quantity and quality; substance and form, corresponds to the opposition-linked to different distances from necessity—between the taste of necessity; which favours the most ‘filling’ and most economical foods, and the taste of liberty-or luxury—which shifts the emphasis to the manner (of presenting, serving, eating etc.) and tends to use stylized forms to deny function [...]

The science of taste and of cultural consumption begins with a transgression that is in no way aesthetic: it has to abolish the sacred frontier which makes legitimate culture a separate universe, in order to discover the intelligible relations which unite apparently incommensurable ‘choices’, such as preferences in music and food, painting and sport, literature and hairstyle. This barbarous reintegration of aesthetic consumption into the world of ordinary consumption abolishes the opposition, which has been the basis of high aesthetics since Kant, between the ‘taste of sense’ and the ‘taste of reflection’, and between facile pleasure, pleasure reduced to a pleasure of the senses, and pure pleasure, pleasure purified of pleasure, which is predisposed to become a symbol of moral excellence and a measure of the capacity for sublimation which defines the truly human man ...

Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, Introduction, Minituit, Paris 1979.