

# **Elite Distinction: Grand Theory and Comparative Perspectives**

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**Abstract:**

Explicitly or implicitly, most of the major social theorists have addressed the issues of emulation and distinction. Largely ignoring each other's views on the matter, they have mainly sought to integrate their discussion within their respective grand theories. The main defect here is that, often extrapolating from the analysis of one particular case during a given period, they have claimed to provide sociological Laws.

On the basis of personal field work as well as a sound acquaintance with ethnographic, historical and sociological literature dealing with elite groups, the author questions the cultural transferability of the major analytical models available. He aims at suggesting how considerable differences from one society to another – as well as, sometimes, across historical periods within the same society – challenge universalistic understanding.

Although comparative research proves to make it impossible to accept any general theory of distinction, the paper however concludes that many classical perspectives are worthy of note if taken as partially valid. The empirical limitation of their interpretations when confronted with the concrete study of elite distinction calls not for their total rejection but for a theoretically eclectic approach.

There is an abundance of theories related to elite distinction<sup>1</sup>. Explicitly or implicitly, most of the major sociologists have addressed this issue. Needless to say, their arguments have been rooted in dissimilar social theories and have arisen in the context of various research objects – such as status-enhancement, luxury, court society, conspicuous consumption, leisure class, fashion, presentation of self, taste, symbolic boundaries etc. They nonetheless converge around one common topic, namely: the necessity for the dominant groups to display external or internalised signs of superiority that signal their upper social position.

One serious problem with this topic is that social theorists have all too often been more interested in finding confirmation for their respective grand theories than in considering the various realities of distinction comparatively. Whenever they have brought empirical evidence to support their position, the main shortcoming has been extrapolation: that is the claim to provide sociological Laws on the grounds of one particular case during a given period.

Contemporary scholars rarely deem classical models of interpretation out of date, even if vigorous debates still surround some authors. Admittedly, several of the founders of the discipline that will be cited here inspire little empirical research today. But, as we shall see, Veblen, Sombart, Simmel, Weber, Elias or Bourdieu are currently being applied, or at least invoked, in case studies – by historians for instance. The latter need theories for their concrete work on elite manifestations of social prestige. On their side, the proponents of the competing sociological schools of thought enthusiastically welcome research that appears to validate and document their theoretical frameworks.

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the usefulness of these analytical grids (manifesting generalizing ambitions) for comparativists dealing with the realities of the

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<sup>1</sup> One caveat is in order here. In this paper, my concern is almost exclusively with *elite* distinction and not with social distinction as a whole (i.e. also including, for instance, middle class differentiation from labour classes), although subaltern representations will sometimes be touched on. I should add that I am employing the term elite because it has the advantage of subsuming many types of upper groups, including in those social contexts where the concept of class would be inappropriate. Regarding the word distinction, as is widely recognised, it presents the advantage of referring not only to the objective idea of separation but also to noticeable eminence and finally to refined manners. It might be worth noticing that this triple meaning can be found in various European languages and that it has been the case for several centuries.

present-day world or with historical enquiries. First, I think it important to emphasize that the social theorists who addressed the issue of elite differentiation largely ignored each other's views on the matter. Seeking primarily to integrate this point within their respective grand theories, they have hardly committed themselves to situating their model of interpretation in relation to their most influential contemporaries or precursors. Second, it will be argued that the vast majority of the available reading grids have either been excessively concerned with a single key principle (e.g. imitation, emulation, habitus, domination) or have over-generalized on the basis of the material gathered from one monographic study.

Sociologists are increasingly recognizing cultural dimensions. This has important theoretical implications because empirical research paying attention to these dimensions reveals variations that are not easily encompassed within a single systematic vision. Drawing from the socio-anthropological literature on elites from various parts of the world, and relying on my own field work (on ostentation in Nigeria as well as 'conspicuous modesty' in Scandinavian countries), this paper will shed doubt on some models leaning toward a reductionist line of reasoning.

Although comparative research proves the total acceptance of any ubiquitous theory of social distinction impossible, I will conclude that some aspects of several classical perspectives are nevertheless valid. The limitation of their interpretations when confronted with the concrete study of elite distinction calls not for their total rejection but for a theoretically eclectic approach.

## **I (SCEPTICAL) EXPLORATIONS IN SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY**

Many writers dealing with elite distinction have not deemed it necessary to acknowledge their indebtedness to predecessors. Indeed, the related literature appears to have given rise to an endless re-discovering of the topic — thinkers being pre-occupied above all with offering analytical models consistent with their own system of sociology. In what follows, I begin by returning to the available theories, giving a critical look to the symptomatic lack of willingness to engage a dialogue between authors. I then make some sceptical reflections upon over-generalizations and extrapolations.

### *Endless Re-Discovering*

Undoubtedly, elitist distance has been a phenomenon of particular significance for many social scientists. Although there is a wealth of literature on this subject, one must admit that it hardly grew through building on the achievements of those who provided pioneering formulations. In fact, not only were many influential theorists seldom motivated by the intention to refute or refine their predecessors' interpretations but, quite often, they have tended to ignore them altogether. Whether this ignorance was due to a lack of knowledge or a deliberate disregard for others' contributions would be an interesting matter to pursue but is beyond the scope of this paper<sup>2</sup>. In any case, apart from Veblen (1994 [1899]), they all considered the question of elite superiority within the ambit of a general effort at theory building and not so much in relation to what might be termed a tradition of studies recognizing the importance of social distinction. Consequently, instead of pointing the ancestry of some seminal works, they have rather been prompted by a desire to provide writings that are theoretically coherent – usually built up around a basic principle underlying their respective approaches, as we shall see below. Not surprisingly, they often confer the uncomfortable impression that they are starting from scratch.

Bourdieu's (1979) *Distinction* can be discussed as a prominent example of theoretical analysis largely ignoring any forerunner. This work which still dominates much thinking in several academic fields should be considered as the '*magnum opus*' of a 'long-term project' aiming at providing a 'general theory applicable to all societies' (Gartman, 1991, p. 423). In this respect, it can be taken not only as an original piece on social distinction in France but also as a book expanding and synthesizing previous Bourdieusian themes. Undeniably, Bourdieu refers first and foremost to his own *œuvre* and not to authors who had addressed these issues before him. Generally speaking, he enters into dialogue with scarcely anyone but some philosophers and the founders of the sociological discipline – Durkheim, Weber etc. – trying to transcend some classical theoretical antagonisms between objectivism and subjectivism, class and status (cf. e.g. Brubaker, 1985). It is precisely this ambitious attempt which 'has established the importance of Bourdieu's work and, for his devotees at least, has

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<sup>2</sup> Likewise, questions related to fundamental disputes between analysts belonging to different theoretical traditions will have to be left aside here.

marked his brilliant success' (Alexander, 1995, p. 129)<sup>3</sup>. Yet, predictably enough, he has been criticized for ignoring the pioneers who had paved the way in the study of elite distinction and he could not but respond to this type of criticism in his subsequent works. It is useful to tell the story backwards. Readers of Bourdieu's (1979) *Distinction* will no doubt remember that there was no reference to Veblen (1994 [1899]) at all, not even to the latter's chapter on 'Pecuniary canons of taste' or the Veblenesque idea of 'distance from economic necessity'<sup>4</sup>. It was only later, when some commentators (e.g. Elster, 1983, pp. 69-70; Miller, 1987) estimated that, in many respects, Bourdieu's *Distinction* was just further developing many of the ideas presented by Veblen (among others), that the French author felt compelled to reply. The way he has tried to counter these criticisms has been somewhat ambiguous. First he has denied any assimilation of his approach to Veblen's theories of conspicuous consumption, on the ground that Veblen's approach had a normative, moralizing, puritan tone very far from his scientific and rigorous perspective. Later he wrote that Veblen's model meant a conscious search for distinction and could be related to rational choice theory whereas, in his own perspective, distinction would be mediated by the habitus and therefore not really intentional (see e.g. Bourdieu 1988, p. 783). Here, as he generally does when he feels convenient, he adopts a very structuralist position, emphasizing unconscious and spontaneous logics. But in an earlier article (1984, p. 6-7) he had stated that distinction was *not necessarily* intentional, which is still another position, indirectly implying that distinction might also sometimes be a voluntaristic process<sup>5</sup>. His latest position has been that it was a misunderstanding to reduce his book to an argument about social distinction (e.g. Bourdieu, 1994). If we add that Bourdieu himself largely contributed to controversies about the applicability of his model for all societies (as will be discussed below when I deal with the question of extrapolations) we are obliged to recognize that debates around his book have mainly had to do with the attempt to impose a new theoretical framework, and prove its originality.

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<sup>3</sup> So said in passing, the appropriations of classical authors are far from being always convincing. To take just one example, I think that there is a serious confusion in Bourdieu's use of the notion of '*style de vie*' which at times seems to refer to *styles of life* (in the Weberian sense of '*lebensstil*', i.e. related to a fixed status) and at other times to the idea of *lifestyle* (related to taste and choice in a modern setting).

<sup>4</sup> In just a footnote (1979, n. 23, p. 275), Bourdieu distanced himself from trickle down perspectives, only referring to the short synthesis by L. Fallers (1961 [1954]) and to the article by Barber & Lobel (1966 [1952]) on that topic.

<sup>5</sup> My emphasis. On this debate, see also Elster (1983, p. 70); Lamont (1992); Trigg (2001).

Another striking illustration as regards the lack of awareness of others' work is the continual re-discovering of the 'trickle effect': that is the tendency for new styles in consumption goods to be introduced via the elite and then to pass down through the status hierarchy. It should be borne in mind that Veblen (1994 [1899] chapter V) had argued that as the upper class constantly demarcated itself from the lower class by defining and redefining the fashionable, the class immediately under it imitated the fashions that 'trickled down' the social ladder and this, in turn, propelled the upper class to assert their superiority by resorting to new insignia of distinction. We know that this emulationist approach of status was also formulated, but independently, by Simmel in his subtle theory of fashion (1957 [1904]). Later on, American functionalists were to develop perspectives in terms of 'trickle down' (Barber & Lobel, 1966 [1952]; Fallers, 1961 [1954]) but without any reference to these previous bodies of thought. Actually, many social theorists, from Elias (1975 [1939]) to Baudrillard (1970) have addressed the same subject, drawing almost the same conclusions about the flow of status symbols – and tastes – along the social scale, but hardly referring to those authors who had offered preparatory foundations for their own reflections<sup>6</sup>. It would not be difficult, for a comparativist, to furnish counterexamples suggesting that the 'trickle down' model is irrelevant in many cases – and not just that of our Western 'post-modern world', I shall revert to that. But what is at stake in the present section is to show how some influential sociologists have sometimes tended to replicate what some of their colleagues had said somewhat earlier on, or to downplay the importance of previous models.

In that respect, illustrations could be multiplied, for instance with regard to the recurring theme of nouveaux riches being able to display external signs of wealth but revealing their social origins by the insecurity of their conduct. One may also wonder whether Elias was not strongly influenced by Spencer's (1893, §432, pp. 222-24) ideas on manners, which used to express subordination and attachment to a superior and, spreading downwards, became general forms of politeness? Or whether his often cited reference to the episode of the Maréchal de Richelieu throwing a purse out of the window in order to explain his grandson that money is meant to be spent lavishly (Elias, 1974, p. 48 [1969]) does not emanate from

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<sup>6</sup> In his work on Ancien Régime France, Elias uses the expressions 'dual front class' and 'two front stratum' that most probably come from the Simmelean approach in terms of '*Zwei-Fronten-Position*' (Mennel, 1989, p. 86) but he does not refer to his countryman's analytical framework. In his well-known book on the consumer society in the 1960s, Baudrillard (1970, pp. 82-83) elaborates on trickle down mechanisms but without indicating that he draws inspiration from anybody else, though Veblen's *Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899) is one of the titles featuring in his bibliography.

Sombart (1967 [1913], p. 88) who had used it years before?<sup>7</sup> Likewise, why did Weber (who, as is well known, rarely quoted others) not invoke Tarde (2003 [1899]) on the latter's previous anti-Marxist analysis of the aristocracy essentially deriving its authority from prestige and not from fortune?<sup>8</sup> So much for examples of theoretical amnesia. It would be easy to propose more, but this would certainly be tedious for the reader.

Admittedly, some authors dealing with elite distinction do refer to their colleagues' analytical frameworks. This is for example the case of Simmel who had written two reviews of Tarde's (1993 [1890]) *Les lois de l'imitation* and was to quote him later. In his well-known article on 'Symbols of Class Status', Goffman (1951, note 3) indeed mentions that, to the best of his knowledge, 'the most general approach to the study of status symbols' is Spencer's (1893) work on 'ceremonial institutions'. He also gives a passing reference to Simmel, but absolutely ignores Veblen and confers the impression of initiating a program almost from scratch. When some social theorists actually endorse ideas adumbrated by their forerunners, a thorough examination of the references proves that it is frequently with a claim to go beyond them. For instance, both Mills<sup>9</sup> and Baudrillard (1972) seem to offer support for Veblen's (1994 [1899]) theory but with the clear intention to provide important additions to his perspective and finally to surpass him.

### ***On Dubious Generalizations and Extrapolations***

In the sociological literature dealing with elite distinction there is a manifest tendency towards generalization. Actually, in this literature, words or expressions like, 'human nature', 'Man', 'general truth', 'sociological law', 'in any stratified society', 'always' abound. This betrays a clear intention to offer theories transcending both time and space<sup>10</sup>. Whether the theses produced are related to a basic principle underlying grand theories or to an inclination

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<sup>7</sup> Actually both authors quote the same French source (i.e. Taine's *Les origines de la France contemporaine*) but Elias, although providing a more detailed analysis, seems to ignore that the very same episode had already been commented in the sociological literature.

<sup>8</sup> It should however be acknowledged that Weber was to mention Tarde's book (1993 [1890]) *Les lois de l'imitation* in what was to become *Economy and Society*.

<sup>9</sup> C.W. Mills has written that Veblen was the "the best critic of America that America has produced" (in Horowitz, 2002, p. 107) but that he was to supplement his approach with his analysis on *The Power Elite* (Mills, 1956). About Mills criticizing Veblen, see Saram (1999, p. 227-28).

<sup>10</sup> Innumerable quotations could be presented here.

to over-generalize, what is intended is to provide a broadly applicable scientific framework. For expository purposes, I have separated out the discussion of fundamental assumptions and that of extrapolations, although this distinction is sometimes blurry (see for instance Bourdieu's wish to impose the central thrusts of his theory – e.g. habitus – on us and his attempt to persuade us that the model of interpretation he has elaborated about the French case is indeed exportable). I shall then consider a third position, namely: that which consists in abstaining from referring to some elements that might contradict a general theory, and finally the very specific case of Weber's ideal-typical constructions.

The aspiration of early sociologists has mainly been theoretical. What they seem to have been overly concerned with was to offer conceptualizations and to build systems aiming towards 'science'. Consequently, the key processes or principles they have brought out permeate all their writings. This obviously applies to their classical contributions as regards the understanding of elite distinctiveness which interests us here. For instance, Spencer's views on class distinction and more generally speaking 'ceremonial institutions' (1893) are clearly affected by his evolutionist, functionalist as well as organicist positions. Likewise, Tarde's obsessive concern with the 'Law of Imitation' led him to a reductionist line of reasoning on the recurring aping of one's superiors (1993 [1890]). An extreme case would be the Marxist research tradition which reduces anything symbolic to infrastructural relations of production and anything social to class, or routinely refers to the theory of 'commodity fetishism'. But one could also mention Sombart's who was prominent among the first theorists for whom elite distinction is a significant object of investigation. The kernel of his argument (Sombart, 1967 [1913]) is that with the development of court society in some European countries, a new class of women emerged, as long as new attitudes towards sexuality; in the last analysis, the primary cause for the development of luxury would be related to the cultural acceptance of 'sexual love' and intra-elite competition in that respect (the last proposition being that strong demands for luxury product eventually led to capitalism growth – but I shall leave this point aside). Sombart's thesis is original and to a certain extent convincing, being supported by historical evidence (admittedly secondary sources). The problem is that he confines his attention almost exclusively to this dimension.

Here, the task for the comparative analyst is to highlight the weaknesses (but sometimes also, as I will show later, the interesting aspects) of such generalizing enterprises. It is thus important to complement Sombart's one-sided picture and show that challenging

luxury may well serve many other purposes – for instance it may prove to be a sound political investment in some contexts. With regard to Marxist theory, the question usually raised is that of the relative autonomy of social prestige in relation to material conditions. Without even having to refer (in a Weberian way) to ancient privileged groups whose status was not systematically derived from economic standing, it is not difficult to show the limits of economistic theories, even in market-dominated societies (Anthias, 2001; Pinches, 1999).

In order to offer an illustration and defence of my sceptical standpoint vis-à-vis some classical grand theories, let me turn my attention to Tarde's case a little bit longer. Gabriel de Tarde is little read today. It should be recalled that he was a French sociologist at least as famous as Durkheim – his major competitor – during his lifetime. Focusing his attention on the relationship between individuals, he challenged abstract sociologism and was to influence the so-called school of methodological individualism as well as the American micro-sociologists. His books are, to a large extent, built around one central sociological process: that of imitation. In the opus which concerns our topic the most (Tarde (1993 [1890])), he expresses the idea according to which people generally seek to imitate those socially superior to them, whom they idealise, by adopting their values and attitudes. These imitation attempts would often prove to be rough but at times also quite thorough. Several parts of Tarde's analysis are very sophisticated. He proposes a reflection on distance from a sociological point of view (1993: 243 [1890]), on imitation and proximity, on elites who end up doubting themselves or on both rational and unconscious grounds for imitation. What interests him is why an imitation is not exactly the same thing as the original model. The advantage of this type of approach is that it opens a whole field of study on *elites as a social model*. However, from a comparative perspective, it is easy to show that the imitation of upper groups is not necessarily the only possible option, nor the only one empirically observable. One may be proud of belonging to a social group which does not stand at the very top of the ladder and keep up with symbolic conventions corresponding to that level. In other words, people do not always consider elites at the top as exemplary (which is well demonstrated for instance in studies on labour class sub-culture). Instead of admiring, trying to imitate or being modelled by a reference group, it is possible to forge a counter-model liable to call the established order into question. To take an example, under the *Ancien Régime*, the French minor provincial aristocracy, at first fascinated by court nobility which they felt close to – because of family or cultural proximity – was to finally understand that insufficient financial means would never allow them to imitate their peers living in Versailles. Consequently, they were to build up a

different model emphasising honour, moral rigour, whilst denouncing the court's decadence (Royon, 2002). Sceptical views about systematic elite emulation have also been expressed by historians working on the upward thrust by middle ranks elements and their perception of the upper class during the long transition from aristocratic to bourgeois society in Great Britain<sup>11</sup>. Another type of objection that may be put forward against Tarde's approach is the possible multiplicity of reference models. When several elite groups are competing (for example new rich versus well-established milieux), standards of superiority often prove to be quite diverse (from pretence to subdued attitudes) for outer aspirants who may spurn the style of the upper groups. Social scientists should also wonder which model of behaviour, or consumption, groups are actually exposed to, from the nearest spheres (family, local area) to the remotest ones (in the capital city, abroad), directly or through the media. Finally, it should be acknowledged that some people seek to acquire a *personal* style and are keen to differentiate themselves from already existing models. Unlike situations where social success is symbolised by the acquisition of the same attributes as those of the established elites, so that everybody might draw a parallel, it is also possible to show one's singularity and try to become a model oneself (like the French or British dandies during the nineteenth century). All this depends on cultural environments and on the concrete possibilities of personal distinction. Within a universe of standardised production, wearing taylor-made clothing or driving a unique car for instance is becoming quite rare and expensive. Very often, only small personal details (e.g. car options) are available.

When we turn to succeeding generations of scholars, the impression is not really different. For instance, in their interpretations in terms of 'ranking', American functionalists are remembered for invariably postulating that status competition would have a beneficial effect on the social system. Besides, it is obvious that by bringing forth a perspective emphasizing social standing and lifestyle issues, 'continuous prestige scale', status attainment models etc., they have attempted to provide an entire new sociological vision aiming at contradicting the Marxist class-analytical one. With this very short summary and assessment<sup>12</sup>, I do not however mean to suggest that their approach, usually based on serious empirical research and paying attention to (cross-)perceptions, was terribly dogmatic. Actually, more than others, the functionalist school of thought proved to be conscious of the

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<sup>11</sup> See Weatherhill (1988, pp 195-96); Langford (1992, pp. 574 ff.); Smail (1994); Nenadic (1994); M. Hunt (1996).

<sup>12</sup> It is of course not possible to give a complete outline of theories in all their wealth here.

specificities of its main research field – i.e. the North American context. I shall come back to this in the second part of the paper. It remains that this school of thought certainly had its own theory-obsessed thinkers like Parsons.

Goffman might serve as a second illustration here. It is certainly arguable whether this author actually was an interactionist or a structuralist (Gonos, 1977). The debate is not insignificant because, according to the symbolic interactionist paradigm, the shape of the status hierarchy is likely to differ depending on which status-assignment system is relevant for defining a situation. On the other hand, a structuralist metatheoretical framework means more objectivist reasoning in terms of fixed ‘frames’ for instance (Goffman, 1974). The detailed ethnographic descriptions available in a large part of his works might lead one to think that he clearly belongs to the first tradition. A thorough examination of his work is of course beyond the scope of this paper. But, as he describes matters, let’s say in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Goffman, 1959), one cannot but conclude that the way he develops his dramaturgical theory (in terms of ‘front’ and ‘back’ regions, self control in public etc.) sounds universalistic. It is only at the very end of the book, in the conclusion, that he introduces a little bit of cultural relativism. From a comparative point of view, it is easy to show, however, that relations to ‘roles’ are fairly different from one cultural context to the other. Likewise, his chapter on ‘Embarrassment and Social Organization’ in *Interaction Ritual* (Goffman, 1967) proves to be very ethnocentric. The way embarrassment is experienced in the Far East and in the ‘Western’ world is extremely different, for example, and he does seem to be aware of that. Goffman’s perspectives are far from being negligible for researchers working on elite distinction in so far as he deals extensively with issues like appearance before an audience, staging, wings but, just like for his famous article on ‘Symbols of Class Status’ (1951), above-mentioned, many of his assertions can be seriously questioned.

Such queries could easily be multiplied. When we turn to Baudrillard’s reflections on the consumer society, for instance, one may really wonder whether his views in terms of ‘totalitarian codes of standing’ which would constitute a universal system of differentiation (Baudrillard, 1968) are still valid in post-modern societies where consumer behaviour is shaped by countless lifestyles that obviously cut across the social hierarchy. I do not mean to say that elites would no longer develop a distinctive set of consumption objects serving to express their status position. But one must admit that there are other attitudes involved henceforth, like self-satisfactions quite unconcerned with other people’s opinions.

Consequently, one cannot but be astonished by his doubtful anthropological parallels between modern consumer society and the *Potlatch* or the *Kula* (Baudrillard, 1972). My main objection is that, too often, a considerable number of theoretical speculations are made on the basis of very little evidence, which leads thinkers to mistakenly postulate invariant logics.

As noted earlier in this section, another detrimental bias is the one which consists in extrapolating from the analysis of one particular case. The question here is whether the theoretical focus and the core concepts raised about one specific context may have their applicability beyond the confines of that local situation. In what follows, I will limit myself to a discussion of three major authors (Veblen, Simmel and Bourdieu) who, on the basis of their one-case study analysis (respectively of the United States, Berlin and France) at one particular period, provided analytical models that they themselves (or their disciples) have tended to generalize across settings.

Appraising Veblen is not a straightforward task. On the one hand, he was definitely a pioneer who made a breakthrough in the study of elite distinction. He was so innovative and sometimes provided such subtle analyses in his *Theory of the Leisure Class* (Veblen, 1994 [1899]) that this book could only become a standard reference. Despite its brilliance, however, the limitations of Veblen's theory stem from his reading of instincts and his ahistorical views about some principles allegedly guiding all human conduct (e.g. Campbell, 1987). As with all the other social scientists considered here, a short presentation inevitably fails to do justice to the complexity of his sociological apparatus – emphasizing 'conspicuous leisure', 'conspicuous consumption', 'pecuniary emulation', 'vicarious consumption'<sup>13</sup> Its merit, and usefulness for comparativists, will be commented in the last section of this paper. At this stage, it should be said that one can only concur with Elias (1974, pp. 48-9 [1969]) who justifiably criticised Veblen for failing to understand the behavioural logics and the mentalities of environments different from the American bourgeois society he was familiar with. Veblen's Americano-centricism is a complex one, since one also has to take into consideration his Norwegian roots (which made him so sensitive to the issue of waste)<sup>14</sup>. The cultural universe he knew best when he elaborated his book was that of Chicago in the 1890s with its 200 millionaires and their lavish mansions by the Michigan lake, its nouveaux riches

<sup>13</sup> On the intellectual legacy of Thorstein Veblen, see for instance Tilman (1992 and 1996).

<sup>14</sup> Following Dorfman's (1966 [1934]) voluminous bibliography, Riesman (1995 [1953]) was to insist a lot on this 'Norskie' dimension. According to later commentators it should not be over-emphasized (see principally Edgell, 2001).

eager to show off, aggressive capitalism and serious class antagonism (see Splinder, 2002). There is no doubt that he described and analysed this kind of universe extremely well (of course in a fairly ironic tone), though I think it not impossible to level reproaches against him even here<sup>15</sup>. Whatever the case, when he comes to sweeping statements or tries to consider other contexts (e.g. aristocratic), he is no longer convincing<sup>16</sup>. His references are extremely vague – he would for instance just mention ‘certain Polynesian chiefs’, ‘a certain king of France’ (1994 [1899], p. 27 and 28) – with hardly any footnote. Although, he sometimes reasoned about stages (‘peaceful savagery’, ‘barbarian’, ‘civilized’), “Veblen was almost alone in seeing continuity and persistence” (Diggins, 1978, p. 18) where early sociologists from his generation “saw change and progress” (id.). Stressing the ‘Conservation of Archaic Traits’ (title of Veblen’s (1994 [1899]) chapter IX) could not entice him to look seriously for differences and discontinuities. Actually, Veblen may be considered as the extrapolator par excellence<sup>17</sup>.

It is of course quite easy, from a comparative perspective, to point to the limits of his general theses. I will content myself with providing two illustrations here. The following passage of Veblen’s *Theory of the Leisure Class* ((1994 [1899], p. 24) is very often quoted. “In order to gain and to hold the esteem of men it is not sufficient to merely possess wealth or power. The wealth or power must be put in evidence, for esteem is awarded only on evidence”. This kind of view is understandable when one considers the dominant ‘upstart culture’ of his time, in a Northern American context which might be considered as the epitome of superiority assertion through external signs. By contrast, especially within some

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<sup>15</sup> For instance, as is well-known, Veblen usually depicts women as the eternal victims of masculine domination, being condemned at best to ‘vicarious consumption’ and ornamental reification. But to take a contemporary literary example, when one reads Edith Wharton’s (who knew this milieu pretty well) novel *The House of Mirth* (1997 [1905]), one sometimes gets a very different view with wives and daughters craving for some measure of conspicuousness and individual prominence at the expense of their husband or father. For instance (p. 27) “Mrs Bart’s worst reproach to her husband was to ask him if he expected her to ‘live like a pig’” (p 29) and then she would order one or two dresses in Paris and call the jeweller. Admittedly, there are other passages and characters in *The House of Mirth* which seem to corroborate Veblen’s one-sided picture. For instance (p. 155) “I want my wife to make all the other women feel small”.

<sup>16</sup> When he states that since the status of hereditary aristocrats is definitively fixed at birth, and since they tend to live in their own cocoon, they would not be forced to show their rank. He most unfortunately ignores intra-elite competition here, within court societies for instance.

<sup>17</sup> A radical writing in the *Monthly Review* expressed it with style and is especially worth citing here. The author wrote that Veblen’s reflections about history and pre-history are “infected with his view on the contemporary United States. He saw the past through a lense encrusted with the American present and, as a consequence this past was permeated with emulatory consumption and invidious distinction” (quoted by Tilman, 1992, p. 223)

settings long shaped by an aristocratic tradition, the chief determinants of status may prove to be rather discreet and mainly incorporated (one thinks in particular of the importance of having a distinguished accent in England), though they aim at creating the same social effects. This raises important sociological issues, such as that of ‘symbolic capital’ (in the Bourdieusian sense of the social recognition of legitimate, institutionalised signs) but also that of concrete inter-action. If a prominent member of the elite knows that the people s/he is facing are already quite aware of his/her superior position, demonstrations of simplicity are likely to beget astonishment and even more admiration. Paradoxically, (false) modesty and understatements should be interpreted as heights of ostentation in some contexts. By symbolically denying the distance which nevertheless still objectively exists, one adds to the myth of one’s own greatness. However, another major theoretical controversy here is whether presentation of self is mainly a question of strategy (in a Goffmanesque game of impression management) or actually takes place at a subconscious level (self-confidence or lack of ease being pre-determined by habitus for instance). As will be emphasized later, commanding social admiration is also very much dependent upon (sub-)cultural factors leading to an austere or impressive demeanour. From the perspective of this paper, this dimension is by no means secondary.

To give another illustration, the Veblenesque approach, by only paying attention to prestigious goods as status symbols, unfortunately tends to underestimate their functional dimension. In many cases, the more conspicuously one can consume, the greater the status others will confer upon him or her. Yet prestigious goods must also be studied taking their practical value into consideration<sup>18</sup>. If limousines (or jets) must certainly be analyzed in terms of attributes of power and status enhancement, one cannot deny that they also have concrete functions of ‘comfortableness’ and rapidity for elites bound to do extensive travelling. This type of ‘utilitarian’ perspective opens a very fascinating subject for the scholar interested in studying the artefacts with which elite individuals and families surround themselves, beyond purely symbolic dimensions.

Let us continue our discussion on extrapolations by considering the case of Simmel. It goes without saying that he was one of the first sociological analysts of modernity and

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<sup>18</sup> Several social scientists rightfully criticize this mono-causal reading (e.g. Goode, 1978, pp. 63-64; Campbell, 1994). Quite a number of economists, thinking in terms of ‘substantive’ and ‘symbolic’ goods, could also be cited here

metropolitan experience (Simmel, 1950 [1903]). Whereas in European societies up until the turn of the nineteenth century prestige goods were only there to confirm and strengthen a pre-existing status, with the advent of mass societies and then consumer societies, goods in themselves became status markers regardless of the social background of each and everyone. Parallel to a growing division of labour, the measure of prestige widened and superiority was not as cumulative as in the past. New mimetic and differentiation strategies appeared and these were, most important of all, linked to socio-economic position. Members of subordinate groups often tried to copy the reference model represented by those above them. It was the end of conventional logics of ostentation and hierarchies and the beginning of a world of individual consumption, with the emergence of a contagious envy of things possessed by those who have more than us – both examples to follow and rivals to overtake at the same time (Perrot, 1995). We know that social distance in this new context was a phenomenon of particular significance for Simmel. We also know that, unlike some other classics, he cannot be accused of having proposed a pervasive grand theory. What commentators usually criticize him for would rather be his impressionistic tone and the fact that his 600-page *Soziologie* is more a collection of small essays than a systematic treatise. Having said that, Simmel nevertheless remains as the author who formulated a lasting theory of fashion and distinction which was to be extremely influential, though it can be seriously questioned from a comparative standpoint. It is in this respect that the German author's legacy is discussed here.

As I have recalled above, Simmel elaborated an emulationist approach of status within his sophisticated analysis of fashion (1957 [1904]). It can be considered as a landmark in what was later to be known as 'trickle down' perspectives, that is the tendency for new styles in consumption goods to be introduced via the socio-economic elite and then to pass down through the status hierarchy. Emphasizing a tension between differentiation and imitation, Simmel certainly offered an enlightening interpretation as concerns the study of the Berlin situation in the early twentieth century, but the extension of his model to other cases is far from being convincing. Had Simmel been content with developing his subtle reading in terms of 'personal conspicuousness' and collective dimensions about this particular context, there would be little controversy. The problem is that his famous article sometimes shows wider ambitions (referring to Renaissance Florence and Venice, dandies), not to mention the use of expressions which have a very archaic ring ('impulses of the soul', 'our race', 'human nature', 'primitive man', 'Kaffirs'). In this respect, it is unlikely that the model of fashion as understood by Simmel can be easily applied across contexts. For instance, one obviously does

not always discern a tendency of the superordinate classes to relinquish old status symbols. Even if we look at the period when Simmel was writing, providing counterexamples would not prove very difficult for comparativists. Suffice it to give that of the motorcar, rejected as hopelessly vulgar by British aristocrats (Cannadine, 1994, pp. 62 ff) who were still very much attached to the horse-driven carriages – a major emblem of their superior status for centuries (Stone, 1967). Quite often, aristocrats would rather praise the ‘patina’ of their belongings symbolising their long-standing elite status (McCracken, 1990, chapter two) than the latest commodities available on the market. Referring to the relevant concepts coined by economists one can distinguish here between ‘distinction through seniority’ and ‘distinction through novelty’. As Swann (2001, p. 63) shows about contemporary buyers of Rolls Royces and Ferraris respectively, “where distinction comes from novelty the elite will trade up to buy the newest models, and the second tier of consumers will suffice with last year’s models (...). Where greatest distinction comes from antiquity the elite will seek the older, more distinguished model, while the nouveau riche will buy the newer models”. Here, it is also pertinent to point out that, quite often, competitive display actually concerns differentiation between elites much more than with regard to other classes. If trickle down there is, the intention seems mainly to distinguish oneself from one’s peers. Furthermore, Simmel’s theory of fashion which was to inspire so many followers now seems obsolete as there are strong empirical arguments in favour of other models of interpretation more in phase with post-modern realities. These will be discussed later.

All social theorists need to start from somewhere and in this respect it is always instructive to be aware of the field experiences that have most influenced their scholarly work. Quite often, there is clearly a tendency to rely on the material from monographic publications which have given them prominence. Undeniably, Bourdieu’s grand theory is based on serious empirical research on the peasant society of the Kabyle in the 1950s and on the French society later. However, to put this bluntly, it is as if his comparative horizon was confined to these two cases, which he has tried to establish as typical illustrations of precapitalist and capitalist society, respectively. In the first case, capital would be masked and take the form of ‘symbolic capital’, whereas under capitalism, accumulation is rationalized, the relations of dependence are institutionalized and dominant agents no longer have to justify their prominence through the fulfilment of patrimonial duties. To quote Dumont and Evens (1999, p. 10), one can say that even if “Bourdieu describes an evolutionary shift from precapitalist to capitalist societies, it is critical to his argument that these are precisely not mutually exclusive

kinds of social arrangements. Just as capital, though incognito, operates in precapitalist settings, so symbolic capital and the habitus are important features of capitalists orders". Bourdieu loves to accuse other theorists of subjectivism (aiming at interactionists or some Weberians among others) or excessive objectivism (Durkheimians, old-fashioned structuralists), intellectualist voluntarism (Sartre), reductionist economism (Marxists). Those who are charged with excessive cultural relativism or would pay too much attention to local meanings and representations (like Geertz) are taxed with 'anthropologism' or 'semiologism' (Bourdieu *dixit* in Bourdieu, Chartier and Darnton, 1985). Notwithstanding his denials in this respect (e.g. Bourdieu, 1987, p. 24-25), he himself can certainly be accused of sociologism in so far as he presents class and capital as universal explanatory principles. His class analysis is extremely sophisticated (convincingly emphasizing the existence of an intellectual and an economic pole in the French case), but it can only be criticised for its inclination to reductionism by whoever follows a comparative perspective. Mainly considering intra-societal variations and largely evading the question of wider cultural and cross-national differences (apart from the two cases constituting his points of reference), Bourdieu can certainly be put within the category of extrapolators<sup>19</sup>.

By insisting on the fact that his theoretical model has worldwide application and dogmatically ignoring that the logics of distinction can be affected by the historical national repertoires of each country, Bourdieu could only expose himself to serious criticisms by scholars doing empirical comparative research on that topic (for a brilliant illustration, see Lamont, 1992). As will be developed in the subsequent section of this paper, not only is it very debatable whether Bourdieu's model is relevant for the United States, but we cannot unproblematically assume that such an analytical framework can be applied to Scandinavian, sub-Saharan or South-East Asian countries for instance. Likewise, his attempt to defend the applicability of *La Distinction* to Japanese Society (Bourdieu, 1994), by bringing up a handful of local references, cannot convince whoever is even a little bit acquainted with Japanese Culture<sup>20</sup>. This of course did not prevent him from finding sociologists willing to import his reading-grid and to make themselves the apostles of his approach all over the world.

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<sup>19</sup> It should be recalled here that in the Preface of the English version of *La Distinction* he did not hesitate to write: "But I believe it possible to enter into the singularity of an object without renouncing the ambition of drawing out *universal propositions*" (Bourdieu, 1986, xi) (my emphasis).

<sup>20</sup> Suffice it to consider the very singular realm of Japanese self-presentation and cross-perceptions. On this, see for instance McVeigh (2000, pp. 20 ff.). As will be clear in the second part of this paper,

The founders of sociology were primarily concerned with social change in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Western society. However, a few – like Weber or Elias whose approaches I shall discuss now – sought to essay a theory of historical dynamics and, for this reason, set out to analyse the social aspects of ‘pre-modern’ or extra-European communities. Elias can certainly be classified among the authors for whom the social sciences ought to aim for large-scale theoretical synthesis. Yet, his approach in terms of configurations makes him a fairly unusual kind of comparative sociologist (the same goes for Weber’s ideal-types perspective). If Elias is clearly an anti-relativist (Elias, 1993 [1970]), due to his insistence on the respective logics behind various types of configurations, he cannot be accused of extrapolating or of aspiring to explain everything with one single grand theory. For instance, unlike Veblen, he quite rightly points out that in industrialized societies, one is able to preserve great prestige without providing public proof for it through costly display. Social pressure for prestigious consumption would no longer have the unavoidable character it used to have (particularly under the court configuration) and would take on a much more private one (Elias, 1974, pp. 54-5 [1969]). Unfortunately, this does not prevent him from drawing a faulty parallel between *potlatch* systems and prestigious consumption within courtly society (1974, p. 49 [1969])<sup>21</sup>. Furthermore, whilst suspicious of general theories, he remained an evolutionist (like Weber) and his strong emphasis on a process of civilisation (Elias, 1973 and 1975 [1939]) drastically limits the range of possible cases, even if it avoids one-dimensional universalism.

This brings me to highlight another type of criticism which can be addressed to classical theory, i.e. the tendency to abstain from referring to some elements that might provide arguments for a revision of the theory. As a comparativist specialised in the study of elite distinction, I am led to concretely work on prestigious goods (clothes, vehicles, residences, luxurious eating), refined manners, the display of a certain kind of entourage (spouses, children, flaunted mistresses, servants), ceremonial pomp and physical appearance. In this respect, it is instructive to see how social theorists often tend to favour some of these

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however, I am also quite willing to acknowledge the merits of Bourdieu’s contribution to the study of distinction.

<sup>21</sup> In the first case, there were reciprocal obligations between clans and not between individuals. It is the group as a whole, embodied in the person of the chief, which had to give and receive with ‘dignity’, or indulge in ostentatious ‘consumption’ (see e.g. Codere, 1950). In the second case, it was more about a competition between *individual* elites around the figure of the king.

facets at the expense of others. As is well known, Elias acutely focuses his attention upon manners. This is consistent with his intention to reveal a process of civilisation (although it should be noted that he most regrettably ignores Antiquity as well as non-Western societies which could be quite ‘refined’). But he says relatively little about extravagant adornment, indulgence in lavish banquets or, strikingly enough, the lack of sexual restraint which used to be so obvious in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century aristocratic life (e.g. Stone, 1977). Without seeing elite competition and the development of luxury as being reducible to the latter dimension – I refer to my earlier comments on Sombart (1967 [1913]) – one may wonder whether Elias did not (consciously or not) minimise the aspects that would seem to contradict his thesis about the rise of distinction through self-control?<sup>22</sup>.

Unlike Elias whose relations with historians have long been controversial<sup>23</sup>, Weber is still widely quoted by historians and considered as one of the pioneers in the field of comparative history. Any work on elite ostentatious behaviour must acknowledge the fundamental distinction between status and class he so clearly made (e.g. Gerth and Mills 1991 [1948], chapter VII), even though he was not the first to have approached it, as well as his innovative analyses in terms of style of life (Weber, 1978, pp. 932-33) or social closure (Murphy, 1988). Methodologically, his ideal-typical approach certainly leads to clear and rigorous analyses, though subsuming situations under the same term often leads him to simplifications or mere allusions. This is particularly true of charisma or of his ‘traditional authority’ ubiquitous category which has been justifiably questioned by anthropologists (notably Goody, e.g. 1996). While Weber certainly had an encyclopaedic knowledge of both ‘Western’ and Asian civilisations, he did not have much theoretical acquaintance with more ‘primitive’ contexts (unlike a Spencer or a Durkheim) which is problematic for an author who sought to embrace all power situations for instance. To be sure, Weber was not one of those social scientists strongly inclined to propose general theories valid at any time and place. He convincingly argued about the specificity and heterogeneity of the ‘West’. It remains that his evolutionist views on modernisation and rationalisation sound universalistic.

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<sup>22</sup> With this hypothesis in mind, one could attempt to provide an overview of the objects of investigation ostensibly favoured and of those (purposely?) neglected by all the above-considered social theoreticians.

<sup>23</sup> It is fitting to recall that he used to warn social scientists against the dangers of historical relativism and descriptive ‘historism’. On their side, specialists of modern European history have demonstrated that Elias’ interpretations on court society were outdated and sometimes wrong (for discussions on this point, see principally Duindam, 1995).

Perhaps some of my critical remarks have seemed ill-conceived to the ardent admirer of some author or other. Yet I urge readers to keep an open mind. The remainder of this paper is devoted to confronting the available grand theories with empirical evidence. My intention will not be to give a final blow to some analytical frameworks but, on the contrary, to underline their merits when taken not as ultimate models of interpretation but as containing elements of truth for some contexts.

## II THE CLASSICS CONFRONTED WITH COMPARATIVE RESEARCH

The socio-historical literature on upper-class behaviour, consumption, post-modernity, together with anthropological fieldwork on dominant groups all over the world, are rich with close observations about elite distinction. I think it relevant to bring the results of these studies together with the above-mentioned theoretical models. The principal issue here is of course not that of comparison between the various thinkers – as some have attempted with a rear intention to prove the superiority of one approach over the others<sup>24</sup>. I would rather argue that the theories elaborated by these scholars are all stimulating and worthy of note, provided we do not see them as definitive reading grids that could systematically be applied across cases and contexts, but as tools useful for interrogating particularities.

### *Empirical Arguments*

Cultural sociology has gained popularity among researchers during the last fifteen years. This ‘cultural turn’ could only but be extremely debated, since it seriously defies the meta-theoretical assumptions of many classical schools of thought. Some sociologists now go as far as considering culture as an independent variable (Alexander, 2003) which is indeed a revolution for a discipline which used to ignore cultural dimensions, merely treat them as emanating from social structures or, at best, see them (like Weber) in terms of ‘elective

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<sup>24</sup> For instance, Mennel (1985, pp. 112 ff.; 1989, pp. 83 ff.) tries to persuade us that Elias’s reflections on elite prestige consumption are more convincing than those of Veblen, Sombart, or Weber, among others, either because his argumentation is more analytically elaborated or is based on less elusive empirical grounds. To dogmatically favour one author over the others is reminiscent of a political militant always blindly agreeing with the party he belongs to.

affinities'<sup>25</sup>. A certain amount of comparative knowledge is necessary for the subsequent reflection liable to raise concerns about grand theory. However, the challenging illustrations provided hereunder are by no means very detailed fieldwork results. Drawing inspiration from the studies of some anthropologists, historians, sociologists, as well as my own, I merely aim at mentioning evidence that suggests that more attention should be paid to cultural diversity. I will point to some African, Asian, North American and European examples which, I think, are consequential and lead one to discuss some theories' basic contentions. In doing this, my hope is to encourage future research on a topic which needs more empirical investigations.

When studying Nigerian 'Big Men'<sup>26</sup> in the 1980s, I was struck by the revealing fact that the local elites hardly aim at isolating themselves and building houses in residential areas. They indeed try to differentiate themselves by constructing the most impressive edifice, but generally in the very place where they have their roots: among their community and clients, be it a miserable village or an overcrowded suburb. Undoubtedly, here we are dealing less with pure logics of social distinction – as would be the case in countries where a class (horizontal) system prevails – than with logics of symbolic ascendancy depending on proximity<sup>27</sup>. On their side, supporters hope that their respective leader will be able to display external signs of wealth in order to compete with those representing other networks. They typically revel in the idea that he possesses more prestigious and impressive goods – cars for instance (Daloz, 1990) – for these are in some way a credit to the whole community which identifies with him. In other words, clients expect of their patrons that they uphold their rank. The inability to do so would come as a grave disappointment since it would denote the community's lack of substance. In a country such as Nigeria, ostentation therefore does not only pertain to a self-glorifying quest by top elites but also meets generalised expectations. From a Western viewpoint, it is sometimes difficult to admit that considerable amounts of money are used for the importation of very costly prestige goods whilst the majority of the population barely have enough to survive on. But to be able to grasp these phenomena, we

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<sup>25</sup> Similar developments are occurring in other disciplines like History (e.g. Burke, 1997) or Political Science (Chabal & Daloz, 2006).

<sup>26</sup> I am using the term 'Big Men' here because it is commonly employed in this West African country but also in reference to Sahlins's (1963) classical model, as proposed in his work on Melanesia. For discussions on the possible adaptation of this anthropological model to the study of African elites' behaviour, see Médard (1992); Daloz (2002b); Werthmann (2003). In this type of environment elites also have to be considered as community leaders and patrons.

<sup>27</sup> Of course, residential areas actually exist on the outskirts of the cities, but the segregation between the rich and the poor was undeniably a much more apparent phenomenon during the colonial period than before or after it.

have to rid ourselves of our ‘Eurocentric’ lenses and empirically enter the universe of meaning that prevails in this part of the world. I think that the key explanation lies in the vertical structure of socio-political competition, essentially composed of rival factions and communities. In the Nigerian case, ostentation must be interpreted in terms of ‘vertical symbolic redistribution’ which complements more concrete redistribution at the heart of patronage systems. Conspicuous display is certainly meant to exhibit prosperity and power, but it somehow also reassures the followers of a particular Big Man’s capacity to supply and satisfy his network of dependants in a particularistic manner – which is the key aspect to acquiring social legitimacy (Daloz, 2002a).

Through this example, we clearly see the collective/vicarious dimension of elite distinction which is a predominant feature throughout Sub-Saharan Africa, albeit more pronounced in some countries than others. Most of the theoretical models I have considered above were designed for societies where class cleavages are predominant. But when societies are above all organized according to vertical axes (be they clientelistic or factional, linked to ethnic or religious identities), these classic schemes prove to be highly non-operative because ‘symbolic struggles’ are experienced in a very different way. Faced with such evidence those analysts who favour a class analysis are prone to suggest that this behaviour is the result of ‘false consciousness’ among the poorer people. Yet the indication is that all, from top to bottom, share such constraining representations. Far from being a mere ideological smoke-screen, this deeply engrained vertical relationship is part of a common cultural heritage. Projecting an image of substance is imperative for all elites, if they want to appear as being credible patrons<sup>28</sup>. The acuteness of inequalities is reduced by the need to be seen as redistributing on a scale appropriate to one’s standing.

In his work on ‘The Material Culture of Success’ in Cameroon, Rowlands (1994, pp. 155-56) equally shows how conspicuous consumption is rarely just “a personal and private act of gratification”. If it may certainly serve as a “statement and confirmation of personal progress”, it is mainly concerned with “public ceremonies” where both power and generosity

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<sup>28</sup> More precisely it matters to indicate that formal roles in such contexts are seldom clearly differentiated. Elites or their entourage must hold a plurality of positions in various sectors to gain maximum resources and social recognition. Consequently, scholars are confronted more with ‘State-business’ or ‘politicians-entrepreneurs’ configurations than sectorial careers. Considering that enrichment in sub-Saharan Africa is primarily based on politics, Big Men usually accumulate wealth and redistribute it in order to gain political support. This political capital, in turn, allows them to extract more economic resources. The question is discussed at some length in Daloz (2002b).

are meant to be emphasized. Studies concerned with cultural meanings would also take into consideration the continued and ambivalent significance of the occult, notably witchcraft – whether it is instrumentalized as a social leveller compelling those who have enriched themselves to share their wealth with the community (e.g. Geschiere, 1997) or to demonstrate, through the display of pecuniary strength, that a Big Man’s sorcery is strong enough to immune those under his protection to supernatural dangers and enemies. Instead of conventionally looking at things in the light of universalistic theories which have received acclaim, Africanists should produce contribution paying full attention to codes of behaviour which often prove to be culture specific<sup>29</sup>.

When turning to Asia, we also find empirical studies implicitly or directly contradicting assumptions made in the standard literature on elite distinction. For instance, specialists of South-Eastern Asia warn us against presuming that the drive to consume luxury brands would mean exactly the same thing as it does in the ‘individualistic’ and ‘selfish’ West (which itself begs the question of which West? – I shall come back to that). Important cross-national differences emerge and similarities are only superficial. We are told that things are indeed quite complex, for example as regards the codes of the new rich<sup>30</sup>. As in Africa, the collective dimension is evident. In Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand (but also in contemporary urban China) even the members of the new middle class appear to be constrained by ‘traditional morality’ emphasizing the necessity of community reciprocity. Wealth is definitely admired, even if it does generate some envy. But, from a cultural perspective, the point is that the conspicuous private consumption of newly rich people may be resented and obligations to ‘one’s people’ can remain very strong. This has important theoretical implications because we are not just dealing with a class-differentiation perspective here, as many classical models would have it, but with contradictory images of success and cultural legitimation. To take two very different illustrations, at the other end of the continent, in Lebanon “if you don’t *fannas* [show off] you are dead” (Gilsenan, 1976, p. 198) which may consequently involve lying<sup>31</sup>; whereas in North Yemen the prosperous *Maria* old elite are determined to “keep themselves aloof from consumption styles” (vim Brock, 2005, p. 258) so as to avoid distinction – in line with their moral commitment...

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<sup>29</sup> See, for instance, several contributions in *Tiers Monde* (1968).

<sup>30</sup> See the work of Pinches and his collaborators (1999); see also the contributions in Robinson and Goodman (1996).

<sup>31</sup> So said in passing, the question of Burmese, Thai or Malayan elites lying to outsiders about their own status is also a fascinating topic from a comparative cultural perspective.

It would be wrong to believe that empirical arguments challenging established grand theories would only emanate from research on very ‘exotic’ places. As far as the ‘West’ is concerned, influential articles and books also have taken issue with some of the classic models. Pivotal to most disputes is the fact that the latter would ignore important internal cultural variations from one society to another as well as across historical periods within the same society. There are a number of different variants of this critical position. One of the most vigorous debates is perhaps that on the applicability of Bourdieu’s (1979) theory of social distinction to the United States. Following some seminal contributions around the issue of social boundaries and cultural norms from a comparative perspective (Lamont and Lareau, 1988; Lamont, 1992) it has mainly evolved into discussions centred on the question of taste displays. This debate is presumably too well-known to need an elaboration here. Let me just recall that on the one side, there are authors paying heed to American exceptionalism and accusing Bourdieu of excessively generalizing from the French case (cf. many contributions in Lamont and Fournier, 1992; Halle, 1993; Erickson, 1996). On the other side, one finds Bourdieu’s advocates wishing to demonstrate that his views have been largely misunderstood, whilst his treatment of the sociology of taste would still be relevant to the United States (Holt, 1997; Trigg, 2001)<sup>32</sup>.

Such controversies can be related to the literature contesting the idea of hegemonic upper-class ‘legitimate’ cultures. What I particularly have in mind are the reflections on eclecticism and ‘omnivorousness’ – whether in the field of music tastes (Peterson, 1992; Peterson and Kern, 1996; Bryson, 1996 and 1997) or that of ‘ethnic cuisine’ (Warde, Martens and Olsen, 1999) – which have brought very interesting empirical data to bear on this debate. In general, within the context of contemporary post-modern societies or ‘advanced consumer culture’, the profusion of lifestyles, the confusion as regards symbolic conventions embodying hierarchy is noticed by experts. The fluidity between signs stemming from both ‘high culture’ and ‘popular culture’ has led many to conclude that the traditional characterization of social life as a continual exchange of imitation and differentiation between the elite and their social inferiors is obsolete. Under such circumstances, most of the above-mentioned theories – from Veblen to Baudrillard – have been deemed out-of-date. It is not so much that post-modernity would tend towards an egalitarian society but rather that many codes now coexist largely

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<sup>32</sup> Older studies about the United States like Bellah *et al.* (1985) or Levine (1988) are worthy of interest here from an historical perspective. See also Peterson (1997).

independently of each other, and their appreciation hardly has any meaning except within each sub-system. I may buy an expensive limousine and spend holidays in a luxury hotel to show that I have succeeded but this does not necessarily earn me the envy of a Harley-Davidson's owner who mainly fancies surfing in the summer. The goal would no longer be to actively foster one's image but to affirm a style of life and define one's own identity (knowing that there are no incontestable standards of superiority anymore).

The problem here is that the copious literature on those issues is largely a dialogue of the deaf. Post-modernists tend to reduce everything to new trends, whereas sociologists aiming at recycling the perspectives of more traditional schools of thought try to convince us that class-marks would still be primordial. It is actually possible to find empirical illustrations corroborating both logics. On each side of the Atlantic, a youngster can probably declare nowadays that Shakespeare is boring, or that rap music is art, and not be despised. On the other hand, due to the proliferation of low cost flights which allow more and more people to travel, it is striking to see how wealthier customers are eager to differentiate themselves by ostensibly enjoying elitist privileges (airport lounges, exclusive booking system etc.). If it is now common for elites to play on different registers, and even possibly adopt traditional symbols of dominated strata, this may arguably lead to post-modernist 'trickle up' or 'trickle across' interpretations as to readings in terms of 'poor chic' emphasizing that such 'recreational' and temporary 'consumption of poverty' is still, eventually, a 'class distinguishing activity' (Halnon, 2002). Not only are we witnessing a 'mixing of codes and the deconstruction of symbolic hierarchies' (Featherstone, 1991, p. 104) but sometimes also what I would call a 'reversed symbolic violence' aiming at desacralizing elitist manifestations. Political correctness and the fear of offending dominated groups may lead one to avoid blatant manifestations of superiority<sup>33</sup>. The ambivalence of today's situation is also well expressed in the remarkable novel *The Bonfire of the Vanities* (Wolfe, 1987) picturing a WASP yuppie so full of himself and obsessively judging everyone else by their material possessions, but still extremely vulnerable as soon as he is not insulated anymore in his exclusive Park Avenue area or Wall Street office. An imposing car brings attention, admiration, and can certainly be interpreted in terms of intimidating 'symbolic violence' in a Bourdieusian way (Boltanski, 1975). But it may also cause resentment and owners have good reasons to believe that they will be targeted first. As I observed above, in a post-modern

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<sup>33</sup> For example, I am thinking of French scholars or experts who feel almost compelled to apologize whenever they use a sophisticated concept on television.

environment characterized by multiple life-style options, a lot of people are also likely to feel quite unconcerned about such a badge of distinction.

Many authors studying ‘Western’ societies unfortunately are more inclined to demonstrate that the theory to which they give preference is right than to study possible contrasts from one country to the other. Consequently, the ‘West’ is often implicitly presented as a homogeneous entity, in contrast with the rest of the world. From a comparative viewpoint, we obviously lack inductive work focusing on extra-societal variations. Even among the European continent, there are obviously huge cultural variations and these should not be under-estimated. For instance, analyses emphasizing social emulation and distinction cannot be mechanically applied to the Scandinavian countries, given the stress that Nordic people place on modesty<sup>34</sup>. There, as is well known, being noticed approvingly goes through a style of presentation tending toward a great simplicity. The effects of ‘*Jante lagen/loven*’ (Auchet, 2004) – meaning the informal rule that discourages feelings of superiority – can be felt amongst all members of the social elite<sup>35</sup>. They are even more powerful when it comes to political elites who cannot be seen to ignore its application and cultivate an image of ‘conspicuous modesty’ which is simply not found elsewhere (Daloz, 2006).

In the above paragraphs, I just wanted to point to some cases suggesting that the meanings influencing elite distinction practices can be very diverse around the world, thereby challenging the dogmatism of grand theories. Many more illustrations could be given here<sup>36</sup>. Trying to steer clear of the Scylla of theoretical reductionism and the Charydbis of impressionistic descriptions, one could propose some new avenues of research worth exploring. For example, it would be interesting to study whether the classical distinction – made about cuisine – between a traditional quantitative ostentation and a more modern

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<sup>34</sup> See for instance Sellaberg (1994) for a sceptic view on the application of a Simmelian ‘trickle down’ and differentiation model to the Swedish case. For an international comparison, see, among others, the study of Silvera and Seiger (2004) about self-esteem in Norway and the United States.

<sup>35</sup> Admittedly, this rule appears less effective in respect of today’s nouveaux riches but even here, it is important to point out that few will ignore it. Displays of ostentation are possible mainly outside their native country, for example when they are on holiday in the Mediterranean or the Swiss Alps.

<sup>36</sup> For instance via recurring to the anthropological literature on prestige goods or to historical monographs on the Antiquity’s Epiphanic monarchs; the extravagant Roman Empire; the pomp of Italian Renaissance; the pageantry of the court of Burgundy, of England at the end of the Elizabethan period, of the Stuarts, and particularly Versailles; the splendour of the Sultans, the grandiosity of maharajas etc.

emphasis on quality<sup>37</sup> can be generalized to other prestige goods? Why are some objects culturally more valued than others to assert social status? Why are attitudes to emulation and originality so different across time and space? Why is the display of external signs of wealth crucial in some places, whereas in others embodied signs (refined manners, self-control, eloquence, display of cultivated dispositions...) prove to be much more important? What is the impact of the political? Not even having to mention extreme cases such as the USSR (see Gronow, 2003), it has for instance been written that a country such as Sweden would have fallen prey to acquisition of prestige goods, just like any other capitalist country, had the social-democratic watchwords not been so hegemonic (Pontusson, 1988).

In this respect, one must admit that the classics' works are full of valuable insights, provided one leaves their universalistic theses aside and considers that there is often a partial truth in their respective contributions. Even though we can only but be mindful of the limits of their models (especially when it comes to a comparative interpretation of meaning) we also have to acknowledge our debt for many of their suggestions.

### *From Limits to Merits*

To sum up, in view of what has been said earlier in this paper, I argue that most theories related to elite distinction have tended to reduce the diversity of social experience to a uniformity which has never existed in real life. Many of the available ones appear less than convincing for a comparativist with their overarching concepts. However, in passing a judgement on thinkers we should bear in mind that a mixture of criticism and admiration is often appropriate. In the first section of this paper, I have critically reviewed the literature dealing with elite distinction. As should be obvious from what has been recurrently said, the major pitfall of those theories has been to ignore the lack of similarity characterizing symbolic relations between elites and other strata. To consider that distinction, emulation, imitation, differentiation etc. would merely be the outcome of universal logics or that it would always be the same old story between upper and dominated classes is to fail to enter the world of their

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<sup>37</sup> See Braudel (1979). This distinction has sometimes been questioned (Flandrin, 1999).

plural significance<sup>38</sup>. Beyond the obvious limitations of most schools of thought in this respect, I will now try, however, to emphasize the extent of their respective insights.

I maintain that the Marxist school's formulation of upper-class symbolic domination is basically deficient. Dogmatically reasoning in terms of economic primacy, the proponents of this approach neglect to analyse the impact of cultures: reducing them to mere super-structural ideological mystification. Furthermore, by asserting that class relations have always prevailed, at least in a latent way, they tend to bring down very diverse situations to one general equation: class determines wealth, which determines supremacy and subordination. Indeed, the major currents of Marxist thought have never given top priority to symbolic issues, deemed rather secondary. I must however admit that, once in a while, in certain variant of Marxism, one finds thought-provoking passages. For instance, though their explanations too often degenerate into simplistic views of elites manipulating culture and assorted lured masses, members of the Frankfurt school and their critical theory descendants sometimes bring forth original lines of argument<sup>39</sup>. Likewise, whereas he would often propose normative and systematic analysis (e.g. on 'Master Symbols' and 'obedient persons': Gerth & Mills, 1953), C.W. Mills is also implicitly instructive as far as the relative specificity of the United States is concerned<sup>40</sup>. E.P. Thomson's work is full of fascinating descriptions although he unfortunately tends to reduce eighteenth-century British elites' ostentatious display (powdered wigs, expensive apparel) to a 'theatre of the great' essentially meant to impress the lower class (e.g. 1978), thereby disregarding intra-elite competition<sup>41</sup>.

Against the typical regression of Marxism towards economism, the great advance of the Weberian approach is that it offers an illuminating distinction between status and class. In market-dominated societies, it can easily be observed that the position of social actors depends on economic inequalities. But in many other cases, inequality is mainly structured by

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<sup>38</sup> The same type of criticism may be directed against anthropologists such as Balandier (1980) or Cohen (1981) as regards universalistic readings of politics as theatre, leading to deference and respectability.

<sup>39</sup> What I have in mind for example is Adorno's (1981 [1941]) view of culture as a means to transcend the 'drudgery of industrial life' and not just 'mere ostentation' as Veblen (1994 [1899]) would have it.

<sup>40</sup> For instance when he rightfully insists on the fact that the U.S. society "makes a fetish of competition (...). It does seem to matter what the man is the very best at; so long as he has won out in competition over all others, he is celebrated" (Mills, 1956, p. 74). This would not be true in many countries which obviously consider some trivial activities as not very legitimate and unworthy of consideration.

<sup>41</sup> For obvious reasons, Marxists are more interested in labour class populations. However, the strength of the Birmingham school is its ethnographic dimension focusing on well-defined groups of people.

predefined privileges within cultural systems<sup>42</sup>. Seen from the outside, these systems may seem quite arbitrary – this brings to mind the important question of sumptuary laws<sup>43</sup> – however, it is important to take their continuity and deep-rootedness into consideration. In this respect, the Weberian discussion in terms of ‘originators’, ‘specific bearers’ and ‘conservers’ of conventions and particular styles of life (Weber, 1978, pp. 932 ff.) is particularly relevant. From a comparative point of view, it is easy to show that economic wealth is not necessarily the main criterion of power and social influence. Other backgrounds related to ancestry, honour, knowledge may prevail<sup>44</sup>. Especially when it comes to contexts where social relationships are based on a subjective feeling of belonging together on traditional grounds (communities, differentiated estates, orders). Weber’s theoretical understanding proves to be most useful – at least as a starting point. His ability to enter different systems of meaning in a ‘comprehensive’ way (i.e. consisting in stressing what apparently made sense for the actors concerned) is also, quite often, of lasting value<sup>45</sup>, not to mention many occasional remarks about the sartorial styles and physical appearance of the elites, or their sense of dignity. When one leaves their recurring concern with typifications a little bit aside, Weber’s writings are far from being insignificant.

Similarly, if one leaves aside his generalizations and somewhat evolutionist views, Sombart proves to be an important contributor to the study of elite distinction in several respects. Though some commentators would deplore that he is “not part of the core of classical sociology” (Grundmann & Sther2001), one must acknowledge the fact that authors from several disciplines have tried to bring him back into favour. Against the critical appreciations made by a structuralist like Braudel (1979, p. 206 and 585) who dismissed his

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<sup>42</sup> One may accept the idea that social classes existed way before the advent of capitalism but they previously had a rather minor impact on stratification. It also goes without saying that periods witnessing a shift from one logic to another prove rather ambiguous as far as social stratification and supremacy of such and such a type of elite (aristocratic versus bourgeois for instance) are concerned.

<sup>43</sup> For a treatment of this aspect, see for instance A. Hunt (1996).

<sup>44</sup> The most current illustration given in this respect by Weber himself (Gerth and Mills, 1991, 192), is the one of the parvenu rejected by the established elites. History books are full of stories showing extremely rich bourgeois desperately trying to be accepted by the court. For instance, James de Rothschild who was to become the wealthiest man in France after the king in the 1830’s suffered from his non-acceptance by aristocratic elites. It is only after having been ennobled and appointed as Consul for Austria that he had access to the most prestigious salons (Martin-Fugier, 1990, p. 137).

<sup>45</sup> For example, I am thinking of what he famously wrote about the aristocratic ‘ethos’ and “the need for ‘ostentation’, glamour and imposing splendour” in a feudal context where luxury is “nothing superfluous” but “a means of social self-assertion” (Weber, 1978, p. 1106).

thesis of a link between luxury and capitalism<sup>46</sup>, historians (Mukerji, 1993; Roberts, 1998) or social anthropologists (notably Appadurai, 1986) have stood for him on various grounds (both empirical and theoretical). Even if he does not establish the relationship between the ‘triumph of illicit love’, court splendour and the growth of capitalist consumption very convincingly, Sombart’s line of argument is original and stimulating. For the comparativist specialised in the study of elite ostentation, several of his distinctions (for instance between quantitative and qualitative emphasis, between refinements leading to sensuous pleasures or respectability, or between the concubine and the influential courtesan) are useful. Above all, he was able to catch something essential in the role played by women in elite distinction. Admittedly, Veblen should be seen as the most important student of ‘vicarious’ ostentation. Yet his one-sided approach (see note 15 above) is not as convincing as Sombart’s more balanced picture about the relation of upper-class women to the consumption of prestigious goods at the beginning of the capitalist era (de Grazia, 1996, pp. 19-21). From a comparative perspective, luxury was of course nothing new by that time. But what has happened is that unusual logics of competitive display have taken the place of traditional ones with the advent of court society.

This brings me to Elias who, although his work is open to serious criticism in many respects as we saw earlier, can nonetheless be considered as having carried the investigation on court sumptuousness a little further than Sombart. His general thesis and interpretations as regards the ‘courtization’ and ‘domestication of the warriors’ (Elias, 1974 [1969]) eventually leading to the unexpected diffusion of civilized manners (Elias, 1973 and 1975 [1939]) can certainly be disputed from an historical perspective (e.g. Gordon, 1994, pp. 88-94) or when thinking of some twentieth-century developments like informalisation or the female emancipation processes (Wouters 1991 & 2004) – not to mention barbarian genocides. The fact remains that Elias should be regarded as an outstanding precursor in the cultural history of manners. This is indeed a fertile research direction, although from a comparative perspective, manners need to be understood in terms of a general tension between modest civility and display. As regards elitist manners, I love to point out that they are irreducible to one single logic. For instance, they may involve a great show of magniloquence and extravagance demonstrating that you are powerful enough to ostensibly free yourself from restrictive norms. Historically, one would think of ancient aristocratic behaviour (before court

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<sup>46</sup> Actually, Braudel’s views on Sombart are fairly ambivalent. On the one hand, he would praise him for his ‘monumental’ oeuvre on the birth of capitalism and sometimes give favourable considerations to minor details. On the other hand, he basically disagrees with an approach paying too much attention to mentalities and not enough to objective socio-economic factors.

life) or evoke Napoleon I who was notoriously, and purposely, rude. But elitist distinction would more often go through a perfect self-command and an understanding of prevailing codes of courteousness. Paradoxically, by controlling yourself you control others, as Elias (1974 [1969]) has shown. Here, the study of gesture is of utmost importance provided comparative analysis actually takes the cultural variability of human gesture into account (e.g. Bremmer & Roodenburg, 1991).

In many societies, bodily control has been translated into signs of social status. Constructing and maintaining a public body is one of the means by which elites uphold their superiority: either walking with a swagger, sprawling out on a chair or achieving sophisticated impressions of natural spontaneity. Surprisingly enough, when it comes to this type of nondiscursive communication, commendable gaits as well as expected postures of self-abasement, Spencer still remains a fairly interesting author. Of course, he is regularly chastised for his speculative scientism, his Social Darwinism, his deterministic perspectives or his recurrent views about ‘advanced’ or ‘less-advanced’ minds and societies. Yet, it is worth noticing that the illustrations he has drawn from his *Descriptive Sociology* publications, compiled with assistants, often prove to be worthy of attention. I am mainly talking about some of the chapters included in the Second volume/Part IV of his *Principles of Sociology* (1893) – ‘Ceremonial institutions’: e.g. on trophies, forms of address, titles, badges and costumes or ‘further class-distinctions’. Some of these nineteenth-century descriptions and interpretations might justifiably be considered as out-dated by anthropologists – though it should be recalled that not a few prominent ones, from various intellectual generations, were to pay homage to Spencer’s pioneering work – and it would be ridiculous to give them credence uncritically. Yet, for the scholar interested in ceremonial pomp, reading this opus is often instructive and inspiring.

Likewise, inadequate as it may be in many respects emphasized above, the work of Veblen should still serve as source of inspiration, especially for topics related to ‘vicarious consumption’ or ‘conspicuous leisure’. One would be mistaken in thinking that it should be totally rejected. But it is as wrong to indiscriminately follow a Veblenian line of argumentation just in order to provide a theoretical framework for empirical studies<sup>47</sup>. Close

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<sup>47</sup> See for instance Vichert’s (1971) or McKendrick *et al.*’s (1982) usage of the Veblenian concepts of ‘conspicuous consumption’ and ‘pecuniary emulation’ about the birth of a consumer society in

rereading of the *Theory of the Leisure Class* (Veblen, 1994 [1899]) leads one to realize how sophisticated his analyses can be. Let me take his approach of ‘leisure’ as an illustration. If the latter should obviously be understood as the opposite of labour activities (and, in the Veblenian’s terminology, as a form of ‘waste’), it does not connote idleness or indolence at all. On the contrary, it may mean hard work when it comes to well-groomedness or learning how to master language and other skills. Actually, “the more time-consuming certain manners or hobbies are, the higher their social respectability and reputability” (Gronow, 1997, p. 36). Veblen has concentrated attention upon many aspects of elitist activities and his classic book is indisputably full of insights and scholarly suggestions. For example, any researcher taking the question of vicarious ostentation through the display of servants can only but pay tribute to his seminal well-illustrated reflections – albeit, as for all other topics, it is possible to identify forerunners<sup>48</sup>. Yet, Veblen’s characterization of social life is now in many ways obsolete. Several authors (e.g. Linder, 1970; Brooks, 1981) have drawn attention to the fact that in the United States, economic elites are not in a position to devote as much time to leisure activities as the workers they employ. Indeed, there is a case for saying that many changes which occurred during the twentieth century have made Veblen’s framework of interpretation outdated, at least in the so-called ‘developed’ countries. Consumer items have become more widely available and this has most certainly altered the nature of ‘pecuniary emulation’. Nevertheless, in assessing the significance of Veblen’s model, the issue is not so much whether there are still leisure classes in the contemporary world, for instance. It is rather to which extent the theoretical model and conceptual apparatus he has elaborated out of the observation of a particular type of society is relevant for the study of other ones.

In the first section of this paper, I examined the major weaknesses of Tarde’s theory which centres on imitation processes. But it was also mentioned that the advantage of this type of perspective is to open a whole field of study on elites as a social model. As is well known, this subject has not generated a unified field of interpretation. Tarde and many others approach it in terms of emulative behaviour whereas some schools of thought would rather put forward principles of (hegemonic) domination: the people at the top being able to impose their arbitrary signs of distinction to a whole society. Typically, authors would try to force

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eighteenth-century England. Conspicuous consumption has now become a matter of considerable debates among historians. Cf. many contributions in Brewer & Porter (1993).

<sup>48</sup> As concerns the theme of staff increasing the prestige of elites because of their own distinction and skills or because they offload their master of certain tasks, I think that one should mention particularly Pascal (1976 [1670], n°316-95)

their respective vision in a very dogmatic way as if emulation or top-down impositions were quasi-universal tendencies. Just as the prestige goods or cultivated tastes displayed by actors at the top of the social ladder sometimes play the role of a paragon but obviously do not in some contexts, it proves difficult to generalize here when one follows a comparative perspective. As underlined earlier, one should not forget that, most often, competitive display actually concerns differentiation between elites much more than with regard to other classes. In this respect, it is particularly relevant to study how elites influence each other at the international level. It is hardly a new subject. Historians, anthropologists and sociologists have long recognized the importance of working on the exportation/importation of means of distinction – and Tarde can actually be instructive here. However, strategies of imitation, but also of syncretism, need particular attention and research nowadays in so far as globalisation makes international cross-perceptions more acute than in the past. Needless to say, cultural dimensions should not be neglected here. It is fascinating to see, for instance, how Arab elites willingly resort to many Western status symbols but would reject the ones liable to threaten their own identity.

In addition to scattered contributions on various topics – like coquetry, adornment (see Wolff, 1950, pp. 50 and 338-44) or flirtation (Simmel, 1984) – which are of relevance for our theme, Simmel's contribution is important in principally two respects: first as a pioneer in the field of what was to be later known as 'trickle down' processes and second as a brilliant analyst of modern metropolitan experience. As regards trickle effects, I have already indicated that this model is far from being applicable to all modern cases but should not be neglected either<sup>49</sup>. The second point deserves a little bit of elaboration here. Simmel has shown that 'modern societies' are primarily characterized by the relative impersonality of social relationships. In large cities, external appearance does not just confirm an already known status but pertains to a constant re-assertion of self<sup>50</sup>. Simmel underlines that interactions within large cities very much depend on 'credit', in the sense that one is permanently

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<sup>49</sup> An interesting attempt to rehabilitate Simmel's reading grid was attempted by McCracken (1990, chapter six) in a study of businesswomen in the United States inspired by Sahlin (1976). The idea is that the professional woman's business outfit would move away from a traditional style of dress affected by pejorative symbolic connotations and appropriate masculine characteristics (dark, squared, tailored jackets) meant to confer them a look of authority. Being threatened by this (relatively subordinate) group, men would in turn tend to adopt a new authority look ('heroic style') re-establishing their distinction. Such generalisations are very debatable indeed. The 'costume-tailleur' i.e. the skirt-jacket combination for women dates back a very long time (1885 in France); as for the adoption of an 'heroic' new style by top male managers, it is far from being obvious!

<sup>50</sup> For very insightful discussions on this topic, I also refer the reader to Ewen (1988).

confronted with the question of knowing whether one may trust a stranger simply on his appearance. The autonomy of the symbolic may allow to artificially affect a superior condition. Yet, this type of strategy will often be hindered by the need to present a certain coherence which proves that one really belongs to the elite. Many lifestyle sociological analyses emphasise the importance of ‘symbolic consistency’. For instance, the objects in one’s possession must form a coherent grouping. By contrast, in the case of odd combinations, elite status becomes blurred and uncertain: there is no ‘status crystallization’ (Lenski, 1954)<sup>51</sup>. This is well illustrated by authors studying social ascent. A nouveau riche would begin by acquiring one prestigious object (a luxurious car for instance) which will then oblige him/her to purchase others in order to enhance his/her new image. S/he would also eliminate anything likely to recall his/her former status. Consumption specialists speak of the ‘departure purchase’ leading to subsequent ones. However, from a comparative cultural perspective, it should be emphasized that strategies may prove to be very complex – some populations proving to hesitate between various codes and trying to find a compromise between them. Again we have an avenue of research worth exploring here, which was undoubtedly initiated by Simmel.

As we have seen, the American functionalist school does not always avoid the shortcoming of over-generalisation. By stating that in any modern society (i.e. characterized by social differentiation and role specialisation) whoever occupies a given position is supposed to conform to a corresponding lifestyle, which in return symbolises his/her status, the authors in question might be right as regards the (relatively open) American social system. From a comparative perspective this view emphasizing ‘status symbols’ would however need to be nuanced. On the other hand, when considering some of the characteristics associated with the researches concerned here, the advocator of cultural perspectivism would often tend to find the approach taken surprisingly satisfactory. What I want to stress here is that the focus on self-perceptions, appraisals of others, the work on concrete objects of investigation – like cars, residential areas, clubs – the sophisticated analyses in terms of reference groups (e.g. Shibutani, 1955) or the capacity to take fully into account elite diversity are reminiscent of ethnographic methodology. It should be recalled that a scholar like W. Lloyd Warner actually had received both a sociological and anthropological education. Furthermore, the fact that he

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<sup>51</sup> An African immigrant who uses most of his salary to buy impressive label clothing and parades on the Parisian boulevards, but rents a miserable suburban dwelling, can only use the metro as a means of transportation and hardly eats will certainly not delude people for long, except possibly when he returns to his own country (Gandoulou, 1989a and 1989b).

concentrated his attention upon small communities and towns (e.g. Warner & Hunt, 1941) contributed to the ethnological flavour of his approach (see also Warner, Mecker & Eills, 1949). Of course, in the line of what has just been said about the Simmelian approach, American functionalists were also to consider large cities and mass society logics (Form & Stone, 1957) as well as the national level (Blau & Duncan, 1967). They were also to combine qualitative and quantitative approaches (Coleman & Rainwater, 1978). It remains that these scientific studies, which were supplemented by descriptive essays (e.g. Packard 1960; 1989), prove quite conscious of US specificities and generally avoid excessive objectivism.

As is true of the analytical frameworks I have discussed so far, Goffman's approach shows both virtues and defects for scholars studying elites from a symbolic perspective. As I observed in section one, his approach is plainly novel and useful in many respects. Unfortunately, he does not seem to be sensitive to comparative dimensions. When I meet elites for interviews, I always pay attention to the way I am introduced to them. There is quite a difference between a prominent person making the effort to come out his/her office in order to welcome you and others having you introduced very formally by a secretary or a servant and not even getting up from their chair. I am equally concerned with what they say during the five first minutes (are they going to spontaneously refer to distinguishing qualities or carefully avoid any self-enhancement? – because they want to cultivate an image of modesty or because they take for granted that their interlocutor is already aware of their eminent position?). External signs, like room decoration for instance, may also prove to be very meaningful as far as presentation of self is concerned. For all these aspects, a good knowledge of Goffman's work is of direct utility. However, one also has to venture into the field of cultural representations and not consider that life would just be 'a bowl of strategies' (Geertz, 1993 [1983], p. 25). In other words, the language of the stage as well as game analogy may be relevant in studying the particular behaviour of elites, especially when they take up a role in front of an audience. But it would be wrong to equate everything with impression management. This said, many passages in Goffman's work open up vast areas of research worth exploring. For instance, in his famous article on "Symbols of Class Status" (Goffman, 1951, p. 298), he mentions the social gains that one may obtain through the display of some objects. It is quite interesting from a cultural perspective to see precisely how distinction in one sector (being well dressed, driving a fancy car etc.) may serve as a starting point to conquer others – although, once again, priorities are likely to vary greatly across contexts. In the same article (Goffman, 1951, p. 300), but subsequently also in *The Presentation of Self in*

*Everyday Life* (Goffman, 1959), he also offers in passing a very stimulating perspective about details and general impressions. If very visible aspects are ostensibly taken care of (like impeccably cleaned windows), it may be assumed by external actors that the same would apply for other elements (which is not necessarily true). This may potentially lead to instructive enquiries about synecdochic status symbols.

While sometimes oversimplifying the general picture about distinctive consumption, Baudrillard's approach from the perspective of semiology often proves valuable. Like Veblen and others, he unfortunately tends to reduce commodities to their symbolic dimensions and downplay the importance of their concrete properties (e.g. Baudrillard, 1972). However, having concerned himself with some unconventional questions: like systems of objects, combinations (Baudrillard, 1968), fake, simulacrum etc., his structuralist views in terms of signs and meanings have legitimately influenced a great many social scientists. If his general interpretations and even the originality of his argumentation are disputable, it does seem to me that the richness of his books lies in his accounts of the new trends of contemporary consumerism. I think, for instance, that his reflections on 'new rarities' – pure air, clean water, space, parks, even silence – which were taken for granted or considered negligible but now appear as 'luxuries' (Baudrillard, 1970, pp. 72-73) – are quite relevant. That is definitely of interest.

Last but not least, let me consider Bourdieu's case. His book on social distinction (Bourdieu, 1979) has been dominating the sociological discussion in the related fields to such an extent that it appears difficult to propose a nuanced appraisal. One is hastily labelled pro or anti-Bourdiesian<sup>52</sup>. It should be recalled that his work on social distinction is written within the general perspective of constructivist structuralism aiming at proposing a sociology of social representations which themselves contribute to the construction of the social universe<sup>53</sup>. Bourdieu's thesis (1979), like Veblen's, starts with a reflection on taste. However, unlike the American scholar, he does not mainly consider members of the upper class but society as a whole. In short, his thesis is that distinction is based fundamentally on the power held by the

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<sup>52</sup> To illustrate, an article I had proposed to an international journal was almost rejected because one of the anonymous reviewers thought I was unfair to Bourdieu whilst another one believed that I was indeed insufficiently critical of the French author's methodology!

<sup>53</sup> This grand theory is often presented in rather opaque language. Many French scholars who have to introduce Bourdieu to students consider that its clearest presentation is available in his article entitled: 'Social Space and Symbolic Power' (Bourdieu, 1987).

upper class arbitrarily to impose on others their categories of perception and appreciation as the legitimate ones. Indicators of prestige and dominant taste originating at the top would become a hegemonic norm with regard to those of other classes (subject to ‘symbolic violence’) which can only be interpreted negatively. In other words what interests him is not so much the display of goods but the exhibition of ‘cultural capital’ and a subsequent ‘classification of the classifiers’. Bourdieu has written many good pages on the French situation in the 1960’s-1970’s, but the exportation of his model to other societies is far from always being plausible. Cultural exclusiveness might be crucial for Parisian elites but much less pronounced for American ones (who focus more on moral judgements), and even for those from a French provincial city (Lamont, 1992). Clearly there is a dynamic in the social genesis of needs that is driven by a process of inter-subjective or inter-group comparison. One does not make evaluations *ex nihilo* but in terms of a pre-coded world. References to the dominant social group may happen to be fundamental for the entire society when its monopolizing position implies a wide collective recognition of its particular norms. However, from a comparative perspective, one question immediately arises: who defines the chief determinants of status, who are the ultimate arbiters of taste? A centralized court (like Versailles), several courts vying with each other (like in Renaissance Italy), counter-elites at the fringe of court life, the upper-middle class, the Bourgeoisie, the established elite, the rising elite, the nomenklatura, the media, the stars, countless fashion leaders and connoisseurs hardly audible within the cacophony of post-modern metropolitan life? It proves quite difficult to generalize here. In addition, are there not also examples that testify to the influence of ‘popular culture’ over dominant social classes<sup>54</sup>? In many respects, Bourdieu’s framework of analysis proves to be most sophisticated. His major contribution as regards the analysis of the French society might be his readings in terms of ‘economic’ versus ‘intellectual poles’ – and not just between three hierarchically ordered classes. This is certainly enlightening for the study of that very society. One can regret that he has devoted so much energy to building up a (more or less convincing) grand theory instead of making the best of his remarkable thick description abilities.

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<sup>54</sup> Music is perhaps the prime example: jazz, reggae, rap have all now become mainstream. Dances such as polka or tango, originally perceived merely as ‘lower class’ entertainment, also made their way into the conventional repertoire. The ordinary man’s full-length trousers displaced the aristocratic culottes. More recently the American workingmen’s blue jeans were adopted not just by rebellious adolescents but also by the elites.

I hope to have shown that if flaws characterize most of the available models dealing with elite distinction, all of them also have real merits. The intention was not systematic debunking. I think that it matters to correct those theories by a comparative perspective that focuses on an interpretative approach to culture. The aim would be to show by examination of empirical evidence how the models in question sometimes make sense and sometimes do not. Otherwise put, they should serve not as analytical references allegedly valid for any time and place, but as sources of hypothesis that may be tested in comparative historical enquiries or in the realities of the contemporary world. This in turn calls for a non-dogmatic theoretical eclecticism.

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