CHAPTER 1

The social construction of taste

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This chapter examines the argument that taste is socially constructed and that the food tastes we have and the choices we make about what to eat are determined by social factors. For example, although man is omnivorous, the cultural rules governing what is defined as good to eat, the way it is prepared, cooked or not cooked, served and eaten vary between cultures in often quite dramatic ways (Scholliers, 2001), and these definitions change through time (Elias, 1978). Thus it is possible to conceive of the construction of taste as occurring within a framework of rules at different levels; the level of culture generally, including cultural rules expressed in food ways or cuisine, filtered through other layers such as region, religion, class, caste, gender, family and so on. This explains how individual tastes can be different within a family; choices are indeed different but they are made within a relatively narrow framework of possibilities provided by position in the social structure. There are in addition the influences of medical

advice, the state and of food suppliers. However, this chapter focuses on the arguments concerning the influence of social class in particular.

Bourdieu and the social construction of taste

Any discussion of the social construction of taste must begin with the seminal work of the French sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu. Bourdieu was not just interested in cultural tastes but also in the way in which taste arises out of and is employed in struggles for social recognition and status. In 1979 he published 'Distinction: a social critique of the judgement of taste', a work which drew together his thinking across a range of disciplines and which explores the lifestyles of France's class structure (Bourdieu, 1984). Supported by an analysis of statistical data already in the public domain, he argued that our taste, and indeed all our consumption behaviour, is an expression of social class. Different social classes can be identified by the way in which they express their tastes in music, art, clothes, home decoration and of course the food they eat. However, his analysis of class does not depend on simple economic or materialist criteria. Nor does he argue that the construction of taste is a simple outcome of the deterministic processes of occupation or income: this is what makes his ideas on the social construction of taste so interesting and powerful.

Habitus

The concept of habitus is the link between the objective and the subjective components of class, that is, class as determined by largely economic factors, and class as a set of practices, dispositions and feelings. Habitus refers to the everyday, the situations, actions, practices and choices which tend to go with a particular walk of life and an individual's position in the social world (this includes, e.g. gender and race as well as class). Habitus therefore, can be seen as including a set of *dispositions*, tendencies to do some things rather than others and to do them in particular ways rather than in other ways. Habitus does not, therefore *determine* our practices, but it does make it more likely that we will adopt certain practices rather than others. The link

with objective class position comes through a consideration of how habitus is acquired. To suggest that it is learned implies a self-consciousness that is absent in Bourdieu's conception. Here we need to draw on the concept of socialization to capture the way in which, although habitus is learned, this learning is acquired in an unselfconscious way simply by being immersed in a particular social milieu. The dispositions acquired through habitus are the ways of doing things that those sharing a particular social position think of as natural and obvious, common sense, and taken for granted. These dispositions do not prevent us from behaving in other ways, that is, they do not proscribe what we can or cannot do through a set of rules, but the patterns of behaviours common to a particular habitus become inculcated in our sense of who and what we are. So habitus *disposes* individuals to make certain choices. While we do not *choose* practices as free individuals, neither are we forced or impelled into them; rather we behave in ways which seem obvious and reasonable given our social milieu. Thus habitus *could* be overridden by other considerations in certain circumstances; for example, rational calculation where an individual realizes that the way he or she is disposed to behave in a particular context is not the best response to that context (Bourdieu, 1979, p. 122). However, since habitus is embedded in class position, choices and tastes are a matter of class rather than of individual personality, or in other words our tastes are socially rather than individually constructed. Habitus and lifestyle on the one hand, and class position on the other, set limits on one another which, while not excluding the caviar eating road digger, make such a choice less likely. The tendency is that individuals sharing a particular habitus (and therefore class position) will react in similar ways, make similar choices and share similar judgements of tastes.

Habitus and social class

This brings us to a consideration of the class-based source of habitus. For Bourdieu, class position is not based crudely on the possession or non-possession of the means of production as in Marxist materialistic conceptions of class. He draws on the work of Weber, which allows him to identify different

classes and fractions of classes in a hierarchical schema rather than to see class in terms of two classes in opposition to one another, although he retains the notion of struggle between the classes (to be considered further later). Bourdieu sees class as determined by the possession of differing amounts of different forms of capital. In simple economic terms, capital is what results from production, and in turn it goes towards feeding more production. For example, a restaurant is a form of economic capital. Once built, it is used to make other things (meals). The raw materials used and the money to buy them with are also forms of capital. Capital thus comes from production and in turn feeds more production; capital reproduces production. However, Bourdieu, in contrast to Marx, who only considered economic capital, extends the idea of capital to other aspects of the social, which he argues are themselves social products which are circulated and which can be used to produce further capital. Of these, cultural capital and symbolic capital are the most significant for our purposes, and are discussed further below.[1]

Non-economic forms of capital

So, then, economic capital is to do with products of the economy (goods and money). Cultural capital is to do with the circulation of cultural products and the reproduction of cultural relations. Cultural capital comes from possessing the kind of knowledge and familiarity with cultural products which enable a person to know how they work, what to say about them and how to appreciate and evaluate them. In essence, how to consume them. Cultural capital is acquired through immersion in habitus; it can be accumulated during a lifetime and passed on from generation to generation in just the same way as economic capital. Cultural capital may come from the actual possession of certain culturally valued artefacts such as paintings. It may derive from activities such as going to the opera or from appreciating fine wine, or from knowledge about cultural products.

Bourdieu distinguishes between *legitimate*, *middlebrow* and *working class* culture and identifies the tastes associated with each of these categories, and for class fractions within them. While it is possible to acquire legitimate cultural capital (i.e. the definitions and judgements of taste possessed by the dominant

classes) through individual effort or education, such expressions of learned tastes do not have the same status and social standing as tastes which appear to be natural or innate.

> The myth of an innate taste … is just one of the expressions of the recurrent illusion of a cultivated nature predating any education. (Bourdieu et al., 1991, p. 109)

Thus to be cultivated, to be a master in the judgement of taste, an appreciation of high culture must appear to be innate:

> Culture is only achieved by denying itself as such, namely as artificial and artificially acquired. (Bourdieu et al., 1991, p. 110)

Cultivated individuals experience their own distinction as taken for granted and natural, as a mark of their social value. It follows then that the working classes must lack the necessary nature for a proper enjoyment of cultural products, and that this explains their infrequent attendance at museums and galleries, their consumption of heavy food and so on. To grow up in a habitus which inculcates cultural capital is clearly an advantage in other spheres. For example, Bourdieu argued that the cultural capital possessed by the dominant classes enabled them to acquire educational capital much more easily than the lower classes. The disposition to succeed in the educational system and the familiarity with the codes and symbols of education, all part of the habitus of the dominant classes, (Wilkes, 1990) leads to the perpetuation of privilege, as educational capital can then be converted into economic capital in the form of well paid jobs.

Symbolic capital is a form of cultural capital which refers to the sphere of signs. All aspects of social behaviour carry the potential to operate as a sign, or symbol, of an individual's position. For example, the type of car an individual drives, where he or she shops, what they wear, all these things carry messages. However, the way in which the messages or signs are interpreted may vary depending on the relative positions of the bearer and the observer:

> Each lifestyle can only really be construed in relation to the other, which is its subjective and objective negation,

> so that the meaning of behaviour is totally reversed depending on which point of view is adopted. (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 193)

Thus, what is valuable symbolic capital in one group is not necessarily worth much in another once these practices are removed from the particular habitus which gives them value. In this way, articles, behaviours and bodily gestures which signify membership of a particular class or class fraction may earn disapproval from members of a different habitus. Various forms of cultural capital compete to assert their own value, and the status of those who hold them. In this struggle, it is the cultural forms and symbols belonging to the most powerful social groups which are able to assert their definition as *legitimate* culture. So the signs and symbols used by the dominant classes to act as markers for their superior position acquire cultural legitimacy because of this very association with a superior habitus. Further, they present themselves not as arbitrary judgements of taste but as natural, and it is the culture of these dominant groups which define all others in their own terms, seeing the culture of subordinate groups as tasteless.

Different forms of capital can be exchanged for other forms of capital. Economic capital can be invested in cultural or symbolic capital and cultural capital can be converted into economic capital. The possession of varying amounts of different forms of capital produces and maintains class distinctions and fractions within classes. For example although in contemporary societies economic capital is the dominant form of capital which supports the broad class categories of upper class, middle class and working class, within these broad categories there are fractions distinguished by their possession or non-possession of cultural and symbolic capital. Bourdieu distinguishes, for example, within the upper classes, the dominant fraction of the dominant class (a fraction which possess high amounts of economic capital but relatively lower amounts of cultural capital) and the dominated fraction of the dominant class (a fraction which possesses high amounts of cultural capital but relatively less economic capital). These class fractions produce different habituses, and distinguish themselves by their different tastes. The appropriation of cultural practices by the dominant classes

enables them to have a sense of distinction deriving from their habitus of legitimately established domination and the power to define and establish the boundaries of taste. The middle classes are characterized by what Bourdieu calls 'cultural goodwill' (Bourdieu, 1979, p. 370); middle class habitus assumes the tone of conformity with the tastes of the dominant class to whose position they aspire, and which enables them to distinguish themselves from the working class. The expression of taste for this class will therefore ape (as far as economic and cultural capital will allow) the taste of the class above and will be characterized by a respect for culture, over-conventionality and over-conformity. However, the bourgeois sense of ease and belonging is absent for the middle classes whose acquisition of cultural practices is only acquired through effort and application. In terms of eating out for example, upwardly mobile middle class groups seeking to copy the restaurant choices or restaurant behaviours of the upper classes might not feel altogether at ease, might feel out of their depth or might struggle to enjoy the food. In addition, of course, their relative lack of economic capital would mean that the cost of this sort of meal could only be justified for a special occasion, adding to the sense of unease. For the working classes taste is the choice of the necessary; a working class habitus is established out of the necessity for the material conditions of existence which values and makes a virtue of the plain, the unpretentious, the useful, the convenient and the practical. For example, eating out is likely to be relatively less frequent and may be in the context of a pub restaurant, a supermarket restaurant or workplace canteen (Warde and Martens, 2000).

Strategies of distinction

The fiercest struggles for cultural legitimacy are conducted between the social groups which border one another. In this way, cultural capital contests the dominance of economic capital through strategies of *distinction*. These strategies focus on issues of taste. Tastes make distinctions between things and practices and endow those who adopt them with distinction. In addition tastes, which are in fact socially constructed, are identified through apparently individual attributes (e.g. the ability to

appreciate quality). It follows then, that the working classes do not take part in these struggles but they nevertheless play a role for the classes above them. These classes, especially the middle classes, seek to demonstrate through their practices and judgements of taste a distance from the vulgarity and tastelessness (as defined by the dominant classes) of the working classes.

High cultural capital is relatively rare, and those who possess it battle to protect its exclusivity. After all, if a group's distinction is challenged by more and more people acquiring the objects, skills or knowledge peculiar to it, then its position is threatened. When the class fraction possessing high cultural capital is threatened in this way, for example, by wider educational opportunities, a drop in price of previously expensive goods, etc. then it changes its signifying objects and tastes in order to retain the distinguishing distance from other class fractions. Thus the signs and symbols which signify distinction and the practices which demonstrate taste, are open to constant change and redefinition. This struggle to adopt new practices to act as markers of distinction could be used to explain, for example, the changing patronage of different restaurants. As social groups lower in the hierarchy struggle to obtain a greater amount of economic and cultural capital and begin to adopt the tastes of the groups above them, these higher social groups must find new practices and tastes in order to preserve their distinction and their claim to superiority. Thus contrary to some accounts of Bourdieu's work (e.g. Warde, 1997) consumption behaviour and taste are not simply *expressions* of class position but are part of the struggle for dominance and legitimacy between the social classes and fractions of classes.

The construction of culinary taste

Let us now turn to how Bourdieu uses this theoretical framework to explain the ways in which culinary taste is socially constructed through habitus. He observes, first, that a simple reading of the statistics of the consumption of different foods leads commentators to:

> See a simple effect of income in the fact that, as one rises in the social hierarchy, the proportion of income spent on

> food diminishes, or that, within the food budget, the proportion spent on heavy, fatty, fattening foods, which are also cheap … declines. (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 177).

However, as he goes on to point out, this simple explanation cannot account for differences in tastes and consumption between social groups who share similar incomes but have very different food consumption patterns. The broad opposition corresponding to income masks more subtle oppositions within the classes. Within the dominant and middle classes in particular, Bourdieu distinguishes differences between the fractions relatively richer in cultural capital and those relatively richer in economic capital. These differences in the volume and structure of global capital give rise to different habituses and lifestyles within the broad class groupings which are expressed in different tastes in food consumption (see Table 1.1). However, the real principle governing these differences in tastes in food is the opposition between the 'tastes of luxury (or freedom) and the tastes of necessity' (Bourdieu, 1979, p. 198). Tastes are shaped by the material conditions of existence; the tastes of luxury are the tastes of individuals born into a habitus that is defined by distance from necessity who possess therefore the freedoms stemming from possession of capital. The tastes of necessity derive from the necessity of producing labour power at the lowest cost; hence the preference for heavy, filling foods among the working classes. For Bourdieu, then, the very idea of taste, since it presupposes freedom of choice, is a bourgeois notion. However, the question of taste is more complex than this. He goes on to argue that it would be a mistake to assume that food tastes and practices are a direct product of economic necessity. Rather, the taste of necessity (which derives from the volume of economic capital) becomes the basis of a habitus and lifestyle that makes a virtue of necessity so that individuals acquire 'a taste for what they are anyway condemned to' (Bourdieu, 1979, p. 199).

Bourdieu goes on to analyse patterns of spending on what he calls three styles of distinction[2] in which the basic opposition between the tastes of luxury and the tastes of necessity is expressed through consumption patterns in different ways by different class fractions within the dominant class. Each of these different habituses has a different way of asserting its

Type of capital possessed and characteristic tastes	Relatively high consumption	Relatively low consumption
Employers: high economic but relatively lower cultural capital *Taste for:* food rich in cost and calories – heavy, meals have many courses, with dishes containing rare and expensive ingredients *Meal preparation:* time consuming, complicated dishes *Opposition with subordinate groups* expressed in terms of lack of economic restraints rather than a change in tastes	Cakes and pastries, wine and aperitifs, meat preserves (e.g. foie gras), game	Fresh meat, fruit and vegetables, restaurant and canteen meals
Teachers: high cultural but lower economic capital *Taste for:* ascetic consumption and originality, exotic cuisine, (e.g. ethnic restaurants/culinary populism) ('traditional' peasant dishes) *Meal preparation:* simple, easily and quickly prepared dishes, making use of pre-prepared ingredients *Opposition expressed by* the pursuit of originality at least cost and disapproval of the rich and heavy food habits of the upper and lower classes	Bread, milk products, sugar, fruit preserves, non-alcoholic drinks, canteen meals, ethnic restaurant meals	Wine and spirits, meat especially expensive cuts, fresh fruit and vegetables, coffee, tea
Professionals: medium economic, medium cultural capital *Taste for:* light, refined, delicate food, traditional cuisine, rich in expensive/ rare products *Meal preparation:* characterized by low calorie, low fat light food, time saving dishes *Opposition with subordinate groups* expressed by distinctions in taste: economic constraints disappear but are replaced by social proscriptions forbidding coarseness and fatness, admiration for slim	Meat especially expensive cuts (e.g. lamb, veal), fresh fruit and vegetables, fish, shellfish, aperitifs, restaurant meals	Meat preserves, cakes and pastries, sugar, non-alcoholic drinks, canteen meals

Adapted from Bourdieu (1979, p. 206).

Table 1.1 Food tastes and food consumption patterns of the upper class fractions

Type of capital possessed and characteristic tastes	Relatively high consumption	Relatively low consumption
Low economic and cultural capital *Taste for:* cheap, high calorie, high fat, heavy cuisine (e.g. nourishing casseroles) *Meal preparation:* cooked dishes needed high time investment (e.g. cassoulet and ouillette) *Opposition with dominant classes* expressed by values about good living: to eat well, drink well, enjoy generous open hospitality	Bread, cooked meats, milk, cheese, cheap cuts of meat especially pork	Fresh fruit and vegetables, restaurant and canteen meals, fish, shellfish

Adapted from Bourdieu (1979, pp. 206–209).

Table 1.2 Food tastes and food consumption patterns of the working classes

distance from the tastes of necessity of the working classes. Taking food as the example, Bourdieu distinguishes marked differences between the industrial and commercial employers on the one hand and the teachers and professionals on the other in the way they express their tastes in their spending patterns (see Table 1.1). These differences express the ways in which these class fractions distinguish themselves from the tastes of necessity which characterize the tastes of the working class (see Table 1.2).

This enables Bourdieu to construct a map of food space and to predict the kinds of tastes different fractions will have, depending on the particular combinations of cultural and economic capital (see Table 1.3). Those class fractions high in economic capital and lower in cultural capital tend to prefer relatively high amounts of rich, strong, fatty, salty food, whereas those high in cultural capital and lower in economic capital prefer healthy, natural, exotic foods. In contrast, the taste of those low in both forms of capital is for cheap, salty, fatty, strong, simmered and nourishing foods. The taste for particular dishes is inextricably linked to the lifestyles of a particular habitus since it is associated with a particular division of domestic labour and domestic economy. A taste for elaborate

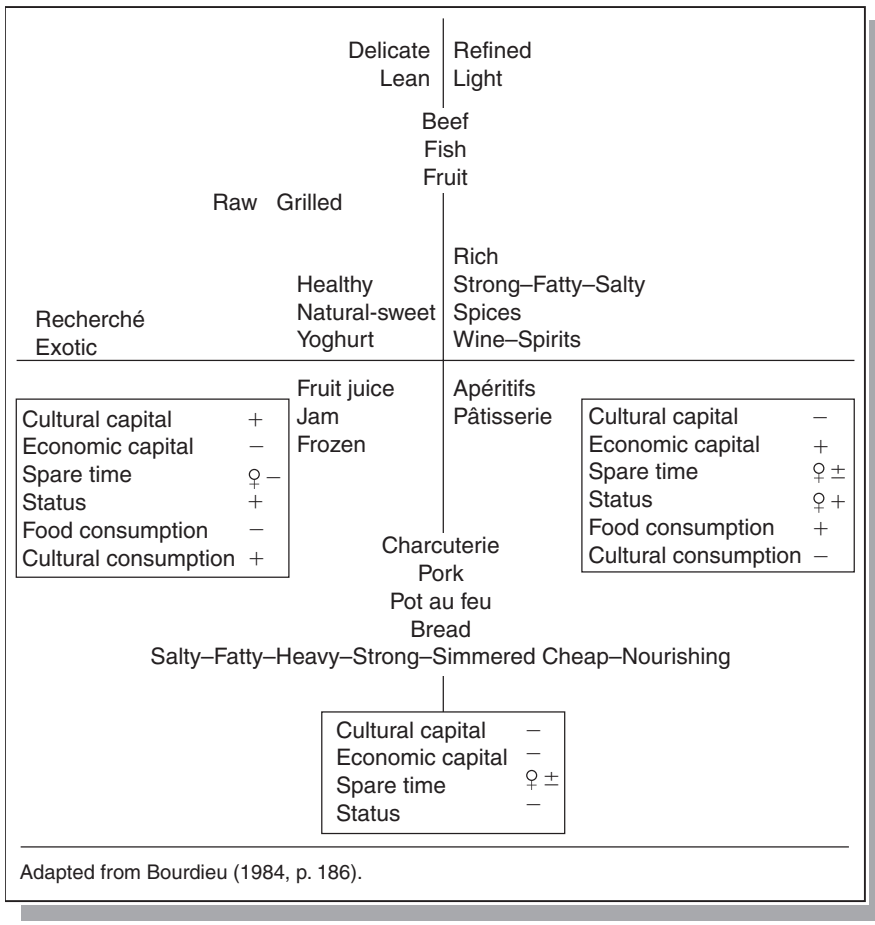

Table 1.3 The food space map

casserole dishes, which demand considerable investment of time is linked to a traditional conception of a woman's role (or the availability of domestic servants). This produces a strong opposition between the working classes and the dominated fractions of the dominant classes in which women are likely to pursue careers. In these latter class fractions, women spend their time on child care and the transmission of cultural capital rather than on traditional domestic labour, which combined with the value of healthy ascetic refined living suggests light low calorie quickly prepared dishes. These differences are

reflected too in different ways of serving and consuming food. Bourdieu discerns an opposition between the free and easy working class meal (characterized by elastic dishes which do not require cutting and counting and thus give an impression of abundance, second helpings for men, without strict sequencing of the meal), and the concern for form which characterizes the bourgeois meal. These differences in the approach to the meal reflect the different habitus of the dominant and working classes. The habitus of the dominant classes represents the bourgeois relation to the social world, which is one of order, restraint, propriety and aesthetics. Through the forms imposed on the appetite, food tastes and associated behavioural traits, become elements in the art of living and the expression of refinement, in opposition to and rejection of the animal nature and material vulgarity of primary needs and the classes who indulge these needs without restraint.

Bourdieu explores the different relationships to the social world expressed by habitus through a detailed analysis of attitudes towards entertaining derived from surveys conducted in 1978. Here the opposition is between substance (the content of the meal, informality, the fun of the social occasion) emphasized in the working class habitus, and form (etiquette, manners, table décor, formality of dress and behaviour) characteristic of the bourgeois habitus. It is here, he argues, that these two antagonistic world views are thrown into sharpest relief; antagonistic because they each represent opposite conceptions of human excellence deriving from opposing relationships to the material conditions of existence. On the one hand, it is substance which matters, not only filling but 'real'; the small café where 'you get an honest square meal and "are not paying for the wallpaper"' (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 199). On the other it is form, where expressions of distinction and power take precedence; a concern for symbolism and aesthetic art of living, a commitment to stylization and a preference for quality over quantity.

A final point needs to be made about the nature of class reproduction. We have seen that Bourdieu argued that classes and class fractions reproduce themselves through the inculcation of habitus, which might imply a rather static conception of the social class structure. However, he overcomes the problem of social change through the notion of *class trajectory*.

This notion is used in two different ways: to explain the movement of a class or a class fraction upwards or downwards in the hierarchy and to explain an individual's progress through a life history. The notion of class trajectory explains why certain fractions of social classes may veer towards the tastes of another class. This may occur, for example, because there is movement in the field of economic production (and therefore possession of economic capital) which either encourages a class fraction to adopt pretensions for the future or which forces a class fraction to adapt to shifting forms of capital. These shifting forms of capital constitute new sites of struggle and new class fractions. In terms of an individual's trajectory, Bourdieu points out that it is possible, for example, to distinguish the children of the old bourgeoisie from those who have recently arrived by their familiarity and ease with cultural capital:

> (cultural capital) opposes … those … who acquired their cultural capital by early daily contact with rare 'distinguished' things, people, places and shows, to those who owe their capital to an acquisitive effort directed by the educational system … whose relationship to it is more serious, more severe, often more tense. (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 127).

The lack of ease experienced by individuals whose trajectory changes in this way is often revealed by a reversion to the tastes and practices of the original class habitus when in private. Food tastes and practices in particular, argues Bourdieu, often reveal the deepest dispositions of the habitus. Thus we may observe a return to the heavier, fattier foods of childhood habitus when in private among those individuals who have adopted the ascetic eating habits of the professional class fraction of the dominating classes while in public.

This section has explored Bourdieu's ideas about the relationship between class and taste. For Bourdieu, taste is not only socially constructed but it is constructed through membership of a particular habitus located in the hierarchy of class relationships. In the struggle for legitimacy, status and power, the expression of taste becomes a way of establishing claims to distinction. However, these expressions of taste and the particular social practices that embody them are not static. As the

material conditions of existence change and more class fractions have access to the cultural and symbolic capital that signifies superiority, so the dominant classes shift their tastes and preferences to ensure distance between themselves and the dominated classes. Food tastes and practices are a particularly good vehicle for expressing these social distinctions and judgements and derive from habitus and class.

Alternative explanations of the social construction of taste

The notion that the primary influence on the social construction of taste is social class has come under heavy criticism in recent years. Bourdieu, in particular, has been criticized on many grounds, most of them related to the view that a class analysis of taste (or anything else) is outdated in modern society[3] and/or is not relevant outside of France. One set of arguments suggests that tastes have become standardized as the result of a process of levelling down of culture generally and the processes of rationalization, democratization and industrialization. The concept of standardization thus challenges the framework put forward by Bourdieu to explain how tastes are constructed. A further set of arguments takes an almost opposite view, suggesting that we are no longer restricted by wider social structural processes such as social class (or gender or race for that matter) but that we are free to create our own identities/make choices, etc. This can be linked to a body of thinking called postmodernism. In some versions of this stream of thought individuals are not conceived of as completely atomized and rootless but as members of shifting groups and alliances (Maffesoli, 1988), a sort of tribal society rather than an individualistic society (refer to Chapter 2 for a discussion on postmodernism).

These alternative paradigms imply contradictory conceptions of the amount of choice actually available within which we express our tastes. We turn first to a consideration of the argument that class is irrelevant to an understanding of the construction of taste because of the processes of standardization, rationalization and globalization. The paradigm of postmodernism is examined in the next chapter.

Standardization

The notion of *standardization* is linked to the concept of *massification*. This derives from a critique of mass culture where distinction of taste and culture are said to be lost in unadventurous and unimaginative products and services designed to appeal to the lowest level denominators of mass consumption. Aesthetic values and discriminating taste atrophy in the face of standardized products. The manufacturers of goods and services have an interest in producing uniform products which can be sold to a large number of people. The more uniform the product, the greater are the economies of scale which can be made and, therefore, the greater the profit on each unit sold. This is the argument of Ritzer (1996), who uses the spread of McDonalds fast food restaurants as a metaphor for the increasing standardization and rationalization of contemporary society. Such standardization produces simplified product ranges, emphasizes quantity over quality and values uniformity over experimentation (Wood, 1998). Further, as Wood (1995) points out, the variations produced to appeal to local markets (mass customization) produce only the illusion of consumer choice, since the consumer can only choose between different variants of essentially the same product. In the absence of choice, there is little opportunity for strategies of distinction based on class. Taste is socially constructed, but through the influence of suppliers of uniform food products and services.

Ritzer (2001) argues, using terminology drawn from Bourdieu, that in a highly McDonaldized society 'we can expect the habitus of most people to be endowed with a strong propensity to prefer McDonaldized settings' (Ritzer, 2001, p. 68). This is because the more that settings such as McDonalds dominate, the less there is a choice to experience other settings, and so even those whose capital predisposes them to prefer other settings will be forced into standardized settings. Ritzer does allow for some minor class-based differences, arguing that the greatest propensity to prefer standardized settings will be found among the working classes and the least among the upper classes with the middle classes somewhat ambivalent, but suggests that these differences gradually disappear as the logic of standardization spreads. However, this is a somewhat simplistic

reading of Bourdieu and the relationship between the different forms of capital and the development of habitus, of the relationship between class-based habitus and the formation of tastes, and of strategies of distinction. Moreover, it is by no means established that the process of McDonaldization has reached or will reach such a saturation point.[4]

Ritzer's arguments do not, of course, rest on the spread of McDonalds restaurants in particular. Fischler (1996) has pointed out that the standardization process has reached traditional restaurants, which are increasingly making use of industrialized, standardized ingredients rather than fresh ones. However, it is important not to confuse the standardization of ingredients and dishes offered in restaurants with a decrease in taste distinctions between the social classes. Fantasia (1995) examined the profile of fast food consumers in France, and notes that the category including senior managers, industrialists and professionals together made up only 7 per cent of the customers. Even more interesting is the fact that manual workers (who make up 40 per cent of the labour force) represented only 2 per cent of customers and that the lower level white collar workers (21 per cent of the labour force) provided 32 per cent of the customers (directly contradicting Ritzer's arguments discussed earlier). On the other hand the statistics do support Bourdieu's contention that the boundary marking the break with the popular relation to food runs between the manual workers and the clerical and commercial employees.

That said, by far the most striking characteristic of consumers is age, with 83 per cent of customers of fast food hamburger restaurants in France under the age of 34 and 57 per cent under 24. This has led some commentators to worry that the taste for standardized food will be more widespread in future generations (Beaujour, 2000). However, Fantasia's (1995) study found that while adolescents enjoyed the freedom from adult supervision and traditional rules represented by fast food they did not believe that they would or should take the place of the café in France. He concludes that the fast food sector and standardization does not pose a threat to the culinary establishment because 'in market terms they are sustained by a different consumer population and in cultural terms, (that) they are concerned with fundamentally different activities' (Fantasia, 1995, p. 233).

In the case of the UK, it could equally well be argued that the lower prices and the informality of standardized commercial dining, far from threatening the development of culinary taste, may instead enable its diffusion to social groups who would otherwise never eat outside the home. In countries lacking a strong cultural perception of national cuisine and gastronomic conventions, it is hard to make a case for the argument that standardization is a threat.

However, the arguments concerning the effects of standardization on the construction of taste do not rest solely on the spread of McDonalds. It is also possible to argue that the industrialization of food has standardized ingredients with a consequent impact on taste. It is difficult to appreciate taste in a world where food is standardized at the expense of taste and geographical mobility means that foods can be consumed out of their natural environment and out of season. Food writers have also commented on the way in which at the same time that consumers can buy fruit out of season, home grown varieties are disappearing. Poulain (2002) comments that very often taste falls victim to the profits of the agro-industrial companies and cites the disappearance of dozens of varieties of apples and pears, replaced by the omnipresent granny smith and golden delicious.

It is certainly true that food is now consumed out of its natural context and that a great number of tasks to do with food preparation have left the home or restaurant kitchen to be undertaken by food companies. More and more pre-prepared foods and dishes are sold in supermarkets, for example. However this does not mean in itself that distinctions of taste between the social classes have disappeared. First, those who have higher economic capital can afford to express their taste by buying expensively imported exotic ingredients.[5] Secondly some products are specifically designed to appeal to 'discerning' customers, allowing a particular class fraction to express its distinction through, for example, a taste for healthy, ascetic food or exotic aesthetic food tastes. Thirdly, as Bourdieu has noted, as soon as a product loses its exclusivity the upper classes turn away from it and search for new taste markers.[6] In all likelihood then, food purchases and tastes of all social classes change over time, but habitus and the possession of differing amounts of

economic capital continue to determine the construction of taste. It is suggested (Poulain, 2002) that the taste of the upper classes in France has now changed to embrace traditional regional cuisine in restaurants (previously rejected as lacking the artistic complexity of haute cuisine) and reject industrialized standardized food. Thus it is far from evident that taste is socially constructed through the efforts of the suppliers of standardized products and services. On the contrary, the evidence supports the view that sees the taste for these products as a product of class, and the ability to appreciate non-standardized food as a mark of distinction.

Indeed there is evidence that food as a signifier of taste and distinction continues in its importance, not only in France, but in the USA (DeVault, 1991) and Britain (Warde et al., 1999). DeVault found that among the professional and managerial class fractions, families saw food, its qualities and its evaluation in aesthetic terms as an appropriate and necessary topic of conversation. Here knowledge of and ability to talk about food and restaurants appears to be an aspect of cultural capital that interacts with the acquisition of economic capital through occupational practices. As Warde points out, such accomplishments have to be acquired 'through exposure to restaurants and to information about canons of good or fashionable taste' (1997, p. 107). Warde concludes from his study of food habits that although 'style is important and (that) food is a vehicle for its expression, the evidence … suggests that collective styles of consumption persist and that these continue to be grounded socially' (Warde, 1997, p. 122). A comparison of data from 1968 and 1988 revealed continued existence of class differentiation, which leads Warde to support the class-based formulation of social taste suggested by Bourdieu. Further, in a study examining the practice of eating out in different sorts of restaurants in Britain, (Warde et al., 1999, p. 124) remark that 'experience of foreign cuisines is a mark of refinement, the possession of which is class related', and that 'cultural consumption continues to reflect social inequalities and, if it symbolizes refinement, is a potential mechanism for social exclusion'. Tomlinson (1994, 1998) shows through an analysis of food consumption statistics that social class in Britain is still expressed through distinctive food tastes. Finally, in a study of eating out, Warde and Martens

(2000, p. 80) find that social class is a determining factor in the explanations of variations in the experience of respondents. In Bourdieu's terms, a combination of economic and cultural capital determined eating out behaviour.

This chapter has set out the arguments of one of the most influential writers on the social construction of taste, Pierre Bourdieu. Bourdieu argues that taste is socially constructed rather than innate and that the primary mechanism for its construction is social class. Bourdieu has been criticized by those who argue that even if social class was once an influential factor it has lost its relevance in contemporary society; or that Bourdieu's ideas are relevant for France but not elsewhere.[7] Here one strand of the criticisms has been examined: the notion of standardization. The paradigm of standardization argues that distinctions of taste are disappearing due to the associated processes of massification, industrialization and standardization. Proponents of this point of view suggest that class-based distinctions of taste (and indeed the class hierarchy itself) are being eroded by the food suppliers, who dominate what we eat inside and outside the home and whose interests lie in providing uniform products. This argument supports the proposition that taste is socially constructed but holds that the primary determinant is the food suppliers and that what is constructed is standardized taste.

However, this chapter has argued that food tastes are far from being standardized and has presented evidence from France, Britain and the USA. It has also argued that social class is embedded in society to such an extent that standardization is unlikely to become the dominant influence on the construction of culinary taste.

End notes

1 The four forms of capital are economic, social, symbolic and cultural.
2 The three structures of consumption he examines are food, culture and presentation (clothing, beauty care, etc.). He then maps out patterns of expenditure for three fractions within the dominant class: industrial and commercial employers, teachers and members of the professions.

3 However, evidence drawn from a study of all the children born in 1946, 1958 and 1974 in Britain shows that social class remains the most important determinant of opportunities and choices. (*Guardian*, 12/10/02, report on Changing Britain, Changing Lives, 2003).
4 Of interest too is a recent article which suggests that consumers are turning away from the traditional McDonald's product. In response to falling sales, the company has introduced … the traditional American diner with waitress service in the USA, and in Paris has upgraded its restaurants to look more like Parisian cafés. (*Guardian*, 19th September 2002, p. 28).
5 For example, the River Café cookbooks demand highly specialized expensive ingredients.
6 When the first McDonalds opened on the Champs Elysées in Paris, the bourgeoisie temporarily adopted it as 'chic'.
7 It is interesting to note how often criticisms of Bourdieu lack any convincing evidence. See, for example, Douglas, 1996, pp. 29–32.

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