

Cory Banks

Calhoun, Craig. 2012. *Contemporary sociological theory*. Chichester [etc.]: Wiley-Blackwell.

### Pierre Bourdieu: an Analysis of Gilded Age Capital

During the Gilded Age, a new class of wealth in the hands Civil War profiteers and business men arose in New York. Before the Civil War, there had been small numbers of the nouveau riche in New York society, but after is when the floodgates let loose. In 1861 there were only three millionaires, but by 1900 there were more than four thousand (Cable, 1984: 13). Industrial empires such as the Rockefeller, Carnegie, Vanderbilt, Frick, Morgan, and Ford were all products of the Gilded Age (Marger, 1992: 87). Technological innovations also gave opportunity to inventors with ingenuity. Between 1860 and 1890 over 440,000 patents were issued for new technologies that pushed forward innovation (Cashman, 1984: 14). In a short time span the traditional affluent old money was replaced by a new nouveau riche whose existence was characterized by opulent patterns of consumption. Pierre Bourdieu wrote concerning the concepts of capital and its relation to social position, Habitus and its governing of practice, and the role of fields in shaping thought. Using his theory regarding the various kinds of capital the patterns of interaction of the Gilded Age elites can be examined.

Concerning the role of capital, Bourdieu wrote “social space is constructed in such a way that agents or groups are distributed in it according to their position in statistical distribution based on two principles of differentiation...economic capital and cultural capital”. These differences in cultural capital creates the “social distances” that are found in traditional “distinctions”. The manner and location individuals interacted with each other in a social space was part of the business of being in the upper class. Those individuals of a “great volume of

overall capital” are those who are exposed to greater levels of cultural capital and are those of greater social positions, while those of “deprived of economic and cultural capital” are those who occupy lower social positions (Calhoun, 2012: 339). The Upper class had an abundance of cultural capital associated with their higher social positions, meaning unique skills, norms, and values corresponding to their class.

A second difference between the two was their patterns of consumption. The old new money relied on lavish rituals of interaction to build social capital. They could use social interactions that attracted the older upper class that allowed them to mingle with people of high social status to improve their own. Extravagant parties, wasteful spending and commodity based lifestyle. The interactions all took place in public, yet exclusive settings. The locations were public in that other members of the upper class must be present at the setting in order to gain social acceptance. The locations are exclusive due to the social and physical separations between social classes. New York at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was a socially segregated place, with the wealthy living in exclusive neighborhoods (Beckert, 2001: 55). In the 1904 book, *Poverty*, it was estimated that 10 million people lived in poverty during the Gilded Age (Robert, 1904: 11). This number being in stark contrast the small number of millionaires that had risen in the Gilded Age. The rich and the poor, literally occupied separate spheres during in their lifestyle.

In order to be accepted into the ranks of the old money the new money would adopt elements of their cultural capital in “position taking”. The new money in the “Position taking” is translated into the space of the social position they seek to occupy (Calhoun, 2012: 340). Individuals who wish to occupy certain social positions will adopt certain behaviors in this “position taking”; this can also alter the nature of the capital that is being emulated. This can be seen in “an initial aristocratic practice can be given up by the aristocracy...when it is adopted by

a growing fraction of the bourgeoisie or petit-bourgeoisie, or even the lower class” (Calhoun, 2012: 338). Class is based on not the individual themselves but the activities associated with that class, as Bourdieu wrote “social positions which is bound by a relation of homology to a set of activities” (Calhoun, 2012: 339). It is the similar values that allowed the upper class to establish a homogenous lifestyle based upon cultural norms and activities.

The upper class had similar elements of cultural capital due to their habitus. Bourdieu wrote “Habitus are generative principles of distinct and distinctive practices” (Calhoun, 2012: 340). He added “the conditioning associated with a particular class of existence produce habitus, ...principles which generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted” (Calhoun, 2012: 346). This allows habitus to be summed up as the shared cultural values and lifestyle related to one’s social position in a field. Habitus creates distinctions in practices that can be objectively observed, creating different patterns of interaction based on social position. In this we see members of the upper class sharing in similar social activities that allow them to distinguish themselves from others. Bourdieu wrote “Habitus functions have remained identical, or similar, to the conditions in which it was constituted” (Calhoun, 2012: 335). The social positions one occupies in the objective world, shapes the subjective world of habitus. Habitus is shaped by the “objective probabilities” in interaction with the “agents subjective aspiration”. It is the position an individual occupies that creates the norms of cultural value that then internally mold a person’s identity in a social sphere. Habitus becomes so intergraded “as unthinkable” making it “submission to order that inclines agents to make a virtue necessity” (Calhoun, 2012: 347). It is governed by a “internal law” or “internal forces arising instantaneously as motivations” (Calhoun, 2012: 348). With all of this in mind Bourdieu listed the functions of habitus as a “self-regulating mechanism” (Calhoun, 2012: 355). The preexisting

social space shapes habitus, as Bourdieu called “product of history, produces individual and collective practices...it ensures that active presence of past experiences” (Calhoun, 2012: 347-348). Habitus governs practice for individual, as Bourdieu wrote “habitus is the principle of selective perception of the indices tending to confirm and reinforce” (Calhoun, 2012: 357).