

## Tastes in practice

**Tuesday 15 July 2014**

**Address: Research Centre for Social Sciences Training Room (YH/001b)**

6 Innovation Close, Heslington, York, YO10 5ZF, University of York

**9.15-9.30: Introduction by Laurie Hanquinet (University of York)**

**9.30-11.00: Panel 1: Taste in Sociology**

Chair: Laurie Hanquinet

9.30-10.00: Antoine Hennion (MINES-ParisTech/CNRS) 'Taste to the test. A pragmatist approach to things we value'

10.00-10.30: Mike Savage (LSE) 'New kinds of cultural capital'

10.30-10.45: Discussion by Sam de Boise (University of York)

10.45-11.00: Debate

**Break: 11.00-11.15**

**11.15-12.45: Panel 2: Class culture and affects**

Chair: Lin Xiaodong (University of York)

11.15-11.45: Lisa Mckenzie (LSE) 'The Precarity of working class culture and practice: Council estate's and stigmatisation'

11.45-12.15: Steph Lawler (Newcastle University) 'The strange compulsion of taste: towards a psycho-social analysis?'

12.15 - 12.30: Discussion by Jeanne Nuechterlein (University of York)

12.30-12.45: Debate

Lunch: 12.45-14.00

**14.00 – 15.30: Panel 3: Tastes and social division**

Chair: Dave Beer (University of York)

14.00-14.30: Stijn Daenekindt (Universiteit Gent) 'De-institutionalization of high culture? The case of secondary education in Flanders' (with Henk Roose)

14.30-15.00: Aaron Reeves (University of Oxford) 'Snobbery and the cultural politics of class'

15.00-15.15: Discussion by Andy Miles (University of Manchester)

15.15-15.30: Debate

**Coffee: 15.30-15.45**

**15.45-17.15: Panel 4: Tastemakers**

Chair: Paul Chappell (University of York)

15.45-16.15: Thomas Franssen (Universiteit van Amsterdam) 'Matchmakers for manuscripts and people. Value, taste and relations in the daily practices of New York literary scouts'

16.15-16.45: Sam Friedman (LSE) 'The Hidden Tastemakers: Comedy Scouts as Cultural Brokers at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe'

16.45-17.00: Discussion by Sharon Macdonald (University of York)

Debate: 17.00-17.15

**Final concluding remarks: 17.15-17.30**

## **ABSTRACTS**

### **Taste to the test. A pragmatist approach to things we value**

Antoine Hennion (MINES-ParisTech/CNRS)

What makes something good? A quality, a label, a price? In this contribution, I will focus on wine and food, and address the minute relationships that have to be set up between bodies, small groups of people, and specific 'agencements' in order to reach disputable judgements on what is good and what is not. Not an agreement on 'things themselves'—agreeing on ways of disagreeing is enough—but on acceptable ways of discussing, sharing and circulating valuations on quality and interest. In a pragmatist perspective, I will delegate the issue to the actors themselves. Producers, critics and amateurs do not only invent procedures to taste wine or cooking, but also diverse ways of putting them to the test: through those debates, they gradually produce the possibility of resistant definitions of quality. The intermediary concept of attention appears central here: organizing taste amounts to defining a whole pragmatics of attention, by connecting bodies, values and settings.

### **The Precarity of working class culture and practice: Council estate's and stigmatisation**

Lisa Mckenzie (LSE)

In recent years there have been significant discussions and arguments raised relating to the position and behaviour of those who live in Britain's poorest neighbourhoods, however there has been little in the way of solutions put forward by any of the political Party's. August 2011 was a flashpoint in the history of these debates, the civil unrest which took place during that month has led to further and continuous on-going social and political debates relating to welfare, unemployment and a sense of disenfranchisement within specific neighbourhoods in the UK. This paper focuses upon a community in Nottingham, St Anns, a council estate housing 15,000 people, who rely upon social housing and public services to as they say to 'keep their heads above water'. The families who rely upon public services, welfare benefits and social housing are the poorest and most disadvantaged people in Britain, and since 2010 are being subject to harsh cuts in their welfare benefits. They are also the most vulnerable to unemployment caused by shrinking the size of the public sector, as they were to the loss of the manufacturing industries in the early 1980's under the Thatcher Government. This paper examines the lives of those who live on this council estate; rely upon social housing, local services, and when the employment market shrinks welfare benefits. The paper addresses the key argument that there has been a significant change in representation of how council estates and working class people who live in them have been negatively re-branded and stigmatised over the last 30 years. Although the focus of the riots has centred around five days in August 2011, this paper introduces families, and individuals who have been part of this ethnographic research over an eight-year period. Thus and arguing that the disturbances in 2011 were an unintended consequence of a significant neighbourhood and community decline over a generation, but which has been exacerbated since 2010 with the Coalitions Governments austerity measures.

## **The strange compulsion of taste: towards a psycho-social analysis?**

Steph Lawler (Newcastle University)

This paper will consider the visceral and affective dimensions of taste (and its other, disgust) to argue that analysis of taste cannot be considered in terms of rational calculation, as usually understood. I will argue that Bourdieu's work on taste and distinction uses a version of the unconscious to explain the grip in which tastes can hold us: furthermore, it shows these unconscious mechanisms to be deeply classed. However, his analysis gives us no way to understand how and why some emotions, fears and desires get repressed. It also suggests a straightforward correspondence between social situation and the psyche. Psychoanalysis, on the other hand, has not conventionally considered class differences, or has dismissed them as presenting manifestations of something else. I suggest that psychoanalytic accounts might usefully be deployed, along with Bourdieu's work, to offer some insights into the complexity of the ways in which classed tastes are lived at both conscious and unconscious levels. The paper is intended to be an exploration of possible lines of development.

## **De-institutionalization of high culture? The case of secondary education in Flanders**

Stijn Daenekindt & Henk Roose (Ghent University (Belgium))

It is claimed that from the sixties onwards the educational system has contributed to the erosion of the institutionalized character of fine arts. In line with a worldwide trend towards more student-centred curricula—some authors argue that the exclusive focus on high culture in school curricula has dwindled. However, empirical research to substantiate these claims is scarce. We focus on secondary education in Flanders to study the centrality of high culture in the educational system: can we discover trends in what forms of culture are represented at school, and do these trends differ between tracks? Our analyses indicate that—in the period 1930-2000—both high and low culture is increasingly being represented in the school context. However, we find that the increment in high culture is especially situated in the academic track—the most prestigious track, which prepares for higher education. These results suggest a persisting institutional embeddedness of high culture in the educational system, and especially in its dominant track.

## **Snobbery and the cultural politics of class**

Aaron Reeves (University of Oxford)

Debates concerning the rise of the omnivore have frequently returned to issues of motivation. Are high status individuals more likely to participate in highbrow or traditional culture because they have eclectic tastes and enjoy forms of culture that have greater complexity? Alternatively, do high status individuals enjoy such cultural forms because they use it as a way of positioning themselves and others in the social strata? Recent work has emphasised that omnivores and other high status cultural consumers are motivated by an underlying disposition toward cultural egalitarianism. Yet, evidence of cultural snobbery is not uncommon, even if it has proven difficult to detect in survey and interview-based research. Using data from the cultural capital and social exclusion (CCSE) project we seek to document whether high status people are more likely than low status people to demonstrate patterns of cultural preference that may be indicative snobbery. We find that enjoying highbrow

culture is correlated with both a reduced likelihood of enjoying lowbrow culture and, further, with the rejection of lowbrow culture. Further, this coupling of highbrow preferences with the rejection of lowbrow cultural forms is also positively correlated with social position and may not be driven by education alone. For example, high status individuals without a university degree are as likely to demonstrate snobbery as high status individuals with a university degree. With latent class analysis we confirm that those people who are expressing positive preferences for highbrow culture are also those that reject lowbrow culture and that this pattern of cultural preference is most common among high status individuals. Finally, these individuals, despite being the group most likely to document snobbery, are also those who believe that snobbery is no longer a problem in the UK. Taken together, this evidence emphasises the continued importance of the cultural politics of class and that some of these omnivores are using cultural practices to position themselves and others in the social hierarchy.

### **Matchmakers for manuscripts and people. Value, taste and relations in the daily practices of New York literary scouts**

Thomas Franssen (Universiteit van Amsterdam)

In this article I analyse the daily practices of literary scouts in New York, specifically their role in the valuation process of new manuscripts and the matching of manuscripts, and people, to their clients in Europe. I argue that there are three problems that face scouts in their daily practices. Getting information on new manuscripts, evaluating the valuation process of a manuscript and matching new manuscripts, American editors and literary agents to their clients. These problems emerge as the most central ones in the daily practices of scouts due to the fundamental uncertainty of the value of new manuscripts. As individual actors cannot determine the value of a new manuscript of a new manuscript on their own and manuscripts do not have inherent value, each new manuscript is valued through a valuation process that is impossible to monitor for an outsider and even for an insider very difficult to keep on top of. The solution to the problems that scouts face is found in investing in intimate relations with editors and literary agents on the one hand and their clients on the other hand. Continuous relational work provides scouts with a broad network of relations through which they can gauge the valuation process.

### **The Hidden Tastemakers: Comedy Scouts as Cultural Brokers at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe**

Sam Friedman (LSE)

Responsible for selecting which new artists are brought to the public attention, talent scouts carry considerable influence in framing performing arts fields. Yet their practices are hidden from public view and how and why they select fledgling producers remains unexplored in cultural sociology. This article aims to demystify the work of such gatekeepers by examining temporary comedy scouts operating at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe. The Fringe is the world's biggest arts festival and a central tradefair for the British comedy field. Drawing on ethnographic observation and interviews with nine comedy scouts, I examine the positions they occupy in the comedy field and, in turn, how this positioning affects which comedians they propel. I then interrogate the brokerage enacted by scouts. Centrally I argue that while some broker between artists and management, all scouts are implicated

in mediating between artists and audiences. In particular, they act to intensify comedy taste boundaries, making judgments based on assumptions about imagined audiences and directing more legitimate comedians to privileged audiences and vice versa. In this way, scouts act as hidden tastemakers, intensifying the scarcity of certain tastes, and strengthening the ability of privileged audiences to use comedy in the claiming of cultural distinction.