2010

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Disciplines
Social and Behavioral Sciences

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This paper was prepared for ANTH-356 (Culture, Class, and Cuisine).

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November 12, 2010
Culture, Class, and Cuisine

Capital, Habitus, and the Body

Our bodies are the vehicles through which we are able to live and interact with others. Our bodies are also the way we are able to identify ourselves and each other. Our bodies reflect our ideologies. The processes, regimes, products, and practices that we apply to our bodies convey our beliefs. It is through our bodies that we are able to exist in the social world. By applying Pierre Bourdieu's theory of capital to Carole Counihan's research on Italian and American beliefs about the body, we are able to see how the bodies of different cultures reflect different cultural and class ideologies.

Pierre Bourdieu analyzes class, or the position we hold within our society, through his theory of capital. Capital is the word Bourdieu uses to describe the socially valued goods we all desire and strive to attain, such as money or status. Capital acts as a basis for class domination due to the fact that it applies a continuum of value to physical and abstract goods; in doing so, value in our society is established. Therefore, those who have more capital have more power. Bourdieu posits that there are four types of capital: economic, symbolic, social, and cultural. Economic capital consists of financially based goods like money, property, possessions. Symbolic capital refers to the means in which a person creates his physical and social reality, or presents his prestige. For example, symbolic capital can be found in the implementing of strategy, such as wearing particular brand names, in order to create an appearance. Social capital refers to social networks we are a part of and the status these networks provide us. For instance, your father may be the head of a multinational corporation; therefore, he may choose to groom you to take over his position in the company some day. Social capital is best summed up by the old adage, “It's not what you know, it's who you know.”
Cultural capital refers to the social skills, habits, speech patterns, education and 'tastes' that we have as a result of our position in society, or our class. Education is particularly important to cultural capital because it is where we learn our social and linguistic skills and develop our 'tastes'. 'Taste' refers to our preferences in things such as food and entertainment that help to define our class. Education also enables the reproduction of class values; thus, maintaining class within society. Cultural capital is extremely important on an individual level because we embody it within ourselves. This embodiment then becomes what Bourdieu refers to as habitus, or the way the body exists and is used in society. Bourdieu also describes habitus as the durable dispositions that shape our behavior and are a product of our personalities and histories. Habitus is also based on our distance from (biological) necessity. When we are trying to meet our needs basic to our survival, our habitus is built around obtaining food, shelter, and other essentials. When our everyday needs are met, there is distance from necessity. This distance allows us to cultivate intricate and extensive interests, habits, and taste, which become a part of our habitus.

Scholars have noted that “the body is a vehicle of the self and that conceptions of the body reveal conceptions of the self” (178). This conception of self through the body often conveys a large facet of our habitus. In Italy, specifically Florence, the body is defined as “a source of pleasure, a reflection of family, and an active agent” (178). Much of the Florentine habitus and the capital at stake in regards to the body is presented in this statement. Florentines believe that desiring and indulging in food is natural and acceptable so long as it is not done in excess. If we indulge excessively, the balance between desire and control is broken and the pleasure of eating is destroyed. Florentines celebrate their love of food in the expression “gola”, which literally translates to mean both “throat” and “desire for food.” Counihan explains that “because gola implies both 'desire' and 'voice', it suggests that desire for food is a voice-a central vehicle of self-expression, an animated manifestation of life and personhood” (180). Therefore, for Florentines the self is expressed not only through their body, but through the way in which the feed their body's desires as well.
Eating habits are a means in which the body can be shaped; thus, they directly affect the body and its presentation. However, Florentines believe that so long as your eating habits are patterned according to their notion of “gola”, there is no reason to be ashamed of the shape which your body takes. “Florentines defined the body not as a product of personal moral concern but as a product and reflection of the family, given by nature through the family” (183). The Florentine habitus is also transmitted through the acceptance of the body as a reflection. In Florence, a plump female body signifies a woman's health and fertility. It is a “widely held Florentine belief that excessive thinness represents physical illness and/or emotional upset. Hence Florentines do not think exclusively or primarily about the body as an aesthetic object, but as a symbol of inner state-of mental and physical health” (185). This is exemplified in the story of the Florentine woman, Sandra, and her mother, Tina. Tina made meals into an unappealing event for Sandra and discouraged her from learning how to cook. Tina's actions made Sandra self-conscious and gave her an aversion toward food, and more specifically meals and their preparation. Sandra manifested these issues through her thin body.

“Florentines view the body as an active agent of a person's self, not as a passive object to be molded into the abstract commodity of beauty,” which is why “Florentines speak about the body in language that prescribe[s] doing rather than appearing” (185). Actively and creatively using the body is important to the Florentine perception of the body, especially for women. Women obtain their ultimate female status by using their body to create life and give birth. This active and creative bodily use carries on following pregnancy and birth through the act of a woman continuing to feed her family. Florentine women maintain their obtained female status through their cooking. For Florentines, appearance is a secondary concern and not a usual focal point in their status because it is dictated by nature.

By applying Bourdieu's theory of capital to Florentine eating mores and body image, we are able to see the two forms of capital at stake in regards to the body and its functions, symbolic and cultural capital. Education functions to reproduce the values of a cultural and its class; thus, it is a form
of cultural capital. The Florentines educate their children to that is acceptable to desire and indulge, so long as it is not done in excess. When Florentines participate in gluttonous behavior, they are risking their cultural capital. Their fellow community member will question their behavior and assume that they have not taken on this ideology within their habitus either because they do not respect the Florentine eating mores or that they are ignorant of them. Either way, Florentines that do not abide these rule will lose status within their community and social class because they are not utilizing their cultural capital. In the case of symbolic capital and the Florentine body image, symbolic capital is not lost if a woman is plump. Symbolic capital is lost if a woman is excessively thin and chooses not to utilize her body in an active manner. A thin body, conveys a passive body that is not creatively working to fulfill its ultimate status of creating life.

In the United States, the American body has become objectified and commodified. Likewise, we have come to demonize food, by organizing it into categories of good and bad, and eating, by turning the act into a test of our discipline and morals. This constricted relationship between food and the body American society has created diseases such as anorexia nervosa and bulimia only occur in developed Western cultures. Counihan examines this disciplined ideology among college students. She discovers that there are food rules to which students adhere in order to “convey a belief in self-control and individual choice...that...uphold hierarchical social relations” (113). Essentially, by following these food rules, students believe they are reproducing and maintaining their social classes. Counihan's students define “self-control [as] the ability to deny appetite, suffer hunger, and deny themselves foods they like but believe [are] fattening” (114). They view individual choice as “determining for themselves what foods are acceptable and consuming them or abstaining from them when they wish” (114). These food rules starkly contrast the Florentine belief of indulging in food non-excessively. The students value their ability each others ability to abstain from food, which makes this ability a form of cultural capital that could become symbolic capital. The knowledge of these food rules and the ability to execute them are the cultural capital, and the thin body that may result from adhering to these rules is
the symbolic capital.

In an attempt to follow the strict food rules students put forth for themselves, they inevitably fall off the wagon and give in to indulgence. However, there are “circumstances under which it is all right to break their own food rules” (199). These circumstances include eating for comfort when under emotional distress, excessive eating during holidays and special occasions, and eating a “treat” when it has been earned. Students perceive these rules for breaking rules as excuses; thus, if a student is always utilizing these excuses they are not adhering to the food rules and are looked down upon. This was for one of Counihan’s female students who uses food as consolation and as a friend, stating, “Whenever I feel lonely, down or depressed, I go to the refrigerator” (120).

Students follow and value these food rules to obtain attractiveness, a powerful form of symbolic capital in the social field of dating that Counihan calls the “culture of romance” (116). In this “culture of romance”, men gain status on the basis of their success at sports, school, school politics, and the attention they receive from women. However, women gain their status solely from their attractiveness which is determined by two factors: the positive attention they receive from men and how thin their peers view them. Therefore, while men may bring their economic, social, cultural, and symbolic capital to this social field, women are limited to their symbolic capital.

Overall, food and its relation to the body, as well as the body itself are sites where capital is sought after and expressed. Economic capital may be used to obtain the desired symbolic capital we wish our body to project. Our eating habits, that are also embodied within our habitus and cultural capital, reflect our symbolic capital as well. When we are able to successfully convey the different forms of capital we posses, then we are able to successfully reproduce and maintain our position within our social class.
References


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