

BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

Tak Wing Chan, ed., *Social Status and Cultural Consumption*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010. 290 pp. \$US 95.00 hardcover (978-0-521-19446-4)

Social Status and Cultural Consumption is a good testament to the effectiveness of the International Sociological Association in fostering international collaboration through its research committees. As explained in the Acknowledgments page, Tak Wing Chan's book is largely a product of RC 28 on Social Stratification and Mobility. This edited collection presents studies from Great Britain, the United States, France, Chile, Hungary and the Netherlands. I think the choice of countries reflects interest and activity levels within RC 28 more than either a random or a theoretically informed sample of countries, but the six do present sufficient variation to convince the reader that social inequality indeed has something to do with the sorts of entertainment people seek out.

All six national case studies, plus two introductory chapters and one concluding one, coalesce around a theme of status (rather than social class) as the main link to cultural consumption. The conceptual approach is Weberian throughout in maintaining the class-status distinction. In a 2007 Chan and Goldthorpe *ASR* article that Chan refers to several times in the present volume, the argument is that European social inequality researchers have been over-preoccupied with Marxian class, and North Americans with a notion of socioeconomic status tantamount to a diluted form of social class. The present work seeks to revive status, measuring it by a behavioural method, since “[f]rom the Weberian standpoint, social status, as a hierarchy of social superiority, equality and inferiority, is expressed primarily through patterns of intimate association” (p. 28). The scaling method comes from asking survey respondents about the occupations of their close friends. Occupations of both respondents and friends are classified into some 25–30 occupational categories. Chan's study used the British classification collapsed to 31 categories. In Canada, the major groups from either the NOC or NOC-S would be equivalent. The categories of respondents and friends are crosstabulated to “express the occupational distribution of close friends by occupational grouping of the respondents.” This provides the data for dissimilarity indices for each pair of respondent-occupations, and those scores are then input into a multidimensional scaling analysis. Each of the authors of the six national

studies used this same scaling technique, although sometimes occupation of spouse was used if friend data were lacking. (As an aside, I experimented with this technique with Canadian data from 2000, but got no usable results. Canadians were too democratic in their choice of friends!)

The cultural consumption dependent variable came from survey questions about events actually “consumed” (usually over the past year) rather than statements of preference. The details of these questions varied by country, since each used a unique data set rather than a standard cross-national survey such as the World Values Survey. In Hungary, for example, they classified theatre, cinema, music (sub-divided into opera, classical, pop/rock, jazz), and visual arts (museum/ art gallery). Other countries, for example Chile, included listening to recorded music or radio talks, and watching TV. Cultural consumption patterns were identified in each national study, sometimes from statistical analysis (such as the multiple correspondence analysis used for the French data), sometimes by a more “eyeball” approach (such as in Hungary). Always, there was interest in the distinction between cultural “omnivores” of wide taste, “univores” who attend a limited set of presentations, and “inactives” who mainly stay home. The US study coded for “paucivores” of middling eclecticism and activity.

Analysis was similar for each national study. First, bivariate tabulations of cultural consumption against social inequality dimensions such as the status scale, class, education, income, along with socio-demographics including gender, age, big city/ small place. Many of the studies included presence of children and marital status. Some had parental SES variables too. Many of the articles used graphical presentations effectively here. Then, in the crucial test for the primacy of status, the whole bundle of predictors went into multivariate logistic regression models.

By and large, the analysis “works” — that is, the status scale based on friends’ occupational footprint is generally a stronger predictor, of cultural consumption than is class. Social class is the “CASMIN” system throughout (*Comparative Analysis of Social Mobility in Industrial Nations*). It mixes occupational skill level, manual/non-manual and a bit of owner/non-owner, into seven categories beginning at the top with Higher level salariat, followed by Lower salariat, Routine non-manual employees, Petty bourgeoisie, Technicians and supervisors of manual workers, Skilled manual workers, and Nonskilled manual workers.

I’ve given detail on the class measure because the class-status distinction is so key to assessing this volume. There is rich empirical analysis in the book but I do have some reservations about the conceptualization. First, the scaling technique is the same used by Stewart, Prandy and Blackburn back in the 1970s, the so-called “Cambridge Scale” for oc-

cupational SES. Chan acknowledges the empirical overlap between the Cambridge Scale and the Chan-Goldthorpe one, but minimizes the point because of “a rather fundamental conceptual difference.” The Cambridge people labeled their scale as one of “social interaction and stratification” whereas the Oxford folks are into status. It’s the same scale, and clearly a predictively potent one around cultural consumption. As the three Dutch authors write in their chapter, “(e)ven if class is purely economical and status a matter of honour, the fact that class and status both involve occupation creates a relationship between the two characteristics of a person, regardless of the different ontological roots of the concepts” (p. 172). I agree. For me Weberian status becomes more meaningful in contexts where we get away from placement into occupational census categories and start talking about more explicitly subjective considerations. The “old money” versus “new money” distinction from Warner’s Yankee City, for example, was a status distinction quite distinct from occupational position. Reputational approaches (“occupational prestige”) for me also have the aura of Weberian status. Education, included as another variable in most of the models, has a “status” component (as Weber himself remarked) and so even does income for more reasons than just Warner’s point.

One could interpret the valuable and interesting findings within this book by reasoning that social class (as CASMIN) has implications for the selection of friends and spouses. If class conditions friendship choices, an analysis of friendship choices will re-create the class (Oxford status) assignments. The friendship aspect, a consequence of class, is indeed a good predictor of peoples’ choices of whether to attend the ballet or a pop concert, or watch TV at home. That would be a simpler rendition of the same findings, still consistent with Weber.

Despite my criticisms, Chan makes a strong contribution in clarifying the implications of inequality for cultural lifestyles. He effectively dismisses the “Frazier and Niles Crane” syndrome of an elite who only patronize highbrow art. If that elite exists, it is too small to show itself in a random survey of a national population.

This is a stimulating, proficient book that will interest people who follow the class-status debate or analyze the marketing of artistic productions, and instructors who would like a clear example to present to students of the consequences of social inequality.

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