

#### Work Package 4: Exploring Class and Cultural Capital

One major ambition of our project this time is to gather evidence that can contribute to the ongoing debates about the relations between class, cultural capital, and taste formations. As everyone will know, there have been extensive debates following Pierre Bourdieu's *Distinction* and other arguments about this, and about his theorisations of the topic. These debates have included both theoretical and conceptual challenges to his work, and various attempts at empirical tests. We think it would be fair to say that currently the state of this debate is roughly as follows:

- a) While the *questions* that Bourdieu posed have been widely influential, his particular ways of framing the distinctions between high/middle-brow/low culture have been extensively challenged, including his attempts to describe a specific 'habitus' attaching to each.
- b) The idea that there may be for each country/culture a single national-class cultural formation has been challenged, both with respect to international flows of culture, and in respect to the operation of subcultures with their own hierarchical structures.
- c) At the same time a number of researchers who have mined large datasets, have claimed to find continuing evidence of connections between class position and cultural engagements.
- d) In all this, two key ideas in particular have remained attractive – even if they are difficult to research: (1) the idea of a general connection between class, income, wealth and power on the one hand, and interest and engagement in forms of culture on the other; and (2) the idea that, broadly, taste cultures are constructed hierarchically, with monetary, educational and personal value attaching differentially across these hierarchies.

There have been important attempts to research individual national distributions of cultural taste and participations – perhaps most notably Bennett et al's study of Australia, *Accounting for Tastes*. But there have been, to our knowledge, no serious attempts to study such phenomena cross-nationally. And that is surely because there have to date been very few large-scale cross-national audience studies. We think we should not pass up the opportunity to try to explore how a story such as *The Hobbit* – which has surely the potential to be placed differently in various contexts – is received in this regard. Here is a children's story, a fantasy story, made into a 'blockbuster film' by a Hollywood studio – all of which might tend to give *The Hobbit* films quite a low cultural status. But it also has educational appeal, it carries the imprimatur of having been written by an Oxford Don, and it connects with the evidently more serious *Lord of the Rings*. Furthermore, there is a long and strong – and very organised – tradition of serious treatment of Tolkien as a whole, a form of 'fandom' which lays claims to serious moral, political and imaginative engagement. These at the very least might push the story into the 'middle-brow'. But one of the first things we know from any kind of audience research is that responses are never unified. The issue is whether it is possible to study them in a way that might reveal *patterns*.

How to do this? As with the 'Interpretive Communities' question, we are constrained by the overall scale of the questionnaire. But here, much more than with that topic, we face real difficulties in formulating the single question (or perhaps at most two questions). The usual indicators used in sociological investigation for class are very difficult to operationalize on a world scale. How does one ask about income levels, or about educational attainment?

Questions we would ask all our partners:

1. Are there any models that you are aware of, perhaps from related fields of research (eg. marketing and advertising) that we might draw upon?
2. *Very* tentatively, almost perhaps as a 'place-holder' (to show that *something* must go there), we formulated a draft question for this. What are your views on this? Does anyone have a specific proposal for a way of rewording this?

19. If you think about your income in relation to where you live, which of the following most reasonably reflects your position?

Top Upper Middle Lower Bottom

3. We have also been thinking about another way of tackling this. Instead of asking about people's overall economic position, might it work if we asked about their *ability to afford cinema tickets*? If we could do this, it might avoid both the sense of intruding on people's private concerns, and the problem of posing this question in a way which does not clash with local/cultural understandings. Here, very tentatively, is our attempt at wording this possible question. What are your views on both this general idea, and this particular wording?

There was a time when cinema was quite a cheap form of entertainment, accessible to everyone. That's not true any longer. How does this affect you? Which of the following comes closest to expressing your situation?

- a. I don't have to worry at all about the cost of cinema tickets.
- b. Although I have to budget, cinema tickets are not a problem.
- c. Cinema is expensive for me, but no matter the costs I keep going regularly
- d. I have to choose carefully the films that I most want to see.
- e. Affording cinema tickets nowadays is a struggle for me.

4. Are there particular ways in which wealth, income and status are understood in the area where you will be gathering responses which will condition how we might ask this question or these questions?