Disputing about taste: Practices and perceptions of cultural hierarchy in the Netherlands

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Summary

Cultural taste is generally not perceived as something neutral. Although the expression ‘there is no disputing about taste’ is often used, people do dispute about tastes. They attach meanings to tastes, they attribute status to certain tastes and they rank tastes in a hierarchical order. ‘Good tastes’ stand opposite to ‘bad tastes’, and ‘high culture’ to ‘low culture’. According to Pierre Bourdieu, cultural tastes plays an important role in shaping and reproducing social hierarchy. High status people distinguish themselves with their ‘high cultural’ taste from those below. However, during the twentieth century, more and more voices have emerged on the fading of the boundaries between high and low culture. Cultural producers increasingly mix high and low art (e.g., in pop art); media and other ‘gatekeepers’ discuss them side by side; and (higher educated) consumers have become ‘cultural omnivores’. These developments went hand in hand with a declining importance of social hierarchy in general, more informal relations between social groups and increasing emphasis on individual choices. Hence, according to many critics, concepts such as ‘high culture’ and ‘low culture’ have lost their significance. Cultural items are – or should be – regarded as equal, rather than as hierarchical.

Sociologists raised the question whether this blurring of boundaries and this broadening of tastes go together with decreasing cultural distinction. If one likes items from both high and low culture, why would one distinguish from others? However, many of them found that the broadness of people’s tastes must be downplayed and that cultural distinction often occurs within domains and genres: one can have, for instance, a good or bad taste within hip hop. Moreover, I argue that the concepts ‘high culture’ and ‘low culture’ as such should not be predetermined in order to measure cultural omnivoroussness, which often happens in quantitative research. These are socially constructed concepts, of which the meanings can change over time. Jazz was once regarded as low culture, whereas nowadays many jazz genres are mainly appreciated by high status people. ‘High culture’ as a domain might remain significant, but one can wonder whether everyone defines it in the same way and whether the criteria to define cultural hierarchy have changed. For instance, does high culture consist of ‘the classics’ that have survived the ages, and/or does the concept refer to original, innovative and authentic art?

In this dissertation, I ask the question whether and how people in the Netherlands actually perceive cultural hierarchy. Do concepts such as ‘high culture’ and ‘low culture’ mean anything to them, and if so, how do they define them? Besides the perceptions, definitions and classifications of cultural hierarchy, I also study how people practise cultural hierarchy in daily life, i.e., whether they express looking down on, or up to, others’ tastes. Finally, I study the opinions people have on these matters; one can perceive
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a hierarchy without agreeing with its existence or its consequences. I asked the following research questions:

*How do people in the Netherlands practise, perceive and value cultural hierarchy, and how is this related to their own taste preferences?*

*To what extent are people consistent in their narrative, and if not, how can contradictions and tensions be explained?*

*How are these practices, perceptions and opinions related to people’s social position, as indicated by education, social origin (i.e., parents’ education), age and gender?*

I studied these issues by conducting interviews with a sample of ninety Dutch people, distributed over three status groups, three age groups and an equal number of men and women. The status groups consist of higher educated people with equally educated parents, upwardly mobile people (i.e., being higher educated but with lower educated parents), and lower educated people with lower educated parents. The rationale behind comparing higher educated people with differently educated parents lies in Bourdieu’s thoughts (validated by others) that people’s upbringing plays a more important role in their cultural taste and participation than their educational track. Upwardly mobile people who aspire to join higher classes fail to do so, due to their lack of knowledge of the required cultural tastes and practices, Bourdieu claims. I complemented these two groups with lower educated people in order to test Bourdieu’s assumptions that lower status people acknowledge the higher value of certain cultural artefacts. I designed a quota sample, that was largely randomly filled by using phone directories, complemented by using my network.

The range of cultural domains discussed in the interviews was broad: music, film, television fiction, theatre and the visual arts. The interviews consisted of three parts, which shed light on different aspects of the research questions. The first part concerned semi-structured, open questions, in order to retrieve people’s perceptions of (the relation between) their own and others’ taste, and thus to explore their possible hierarchical practices. By letting people speak in their own words about the development of their cultural taste, whether or not in a distinctive way, I was able to study people’s interpretations and valuations of taste differences. The second part of each interview consisted of relatively more structured questions on concepts such as ‘high culture’ and ‘low culture’, in order to specifically study people’s perceptions and definitions of (and often opinions on) cultural hierarchy. The final part was a ranking task, in which respondents were asked to rank thirty items from the field of music, both according to
their personal taste and to their perception of high and low culture. This part of the research, analysed in a quantitative way, enabled me to scrutinise the exact hierarchical rankings and the logics behind these rankings, as well as the differences and similarities between taste preferences and hierarchical perceptions.

Before chapter 2 provides the details of these methodological issues, chapter 1 tries to explain the confusion on concepts such as ‘high culture’ by means of a historical account. Cultural distinction and cultural hierarchy are not as old as humanity, but emerged and developed in a few centuries’ time. During the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, elites distinguished themselves through the possession of art, but this was mainly based on its size, grandeur and displayed craftsmanship. Elites and the common people often enjoyed cultural events together. From the sixteenth to nineteenth century, a complex interplay of civilisation and professionalisation processes resulted in a specific domain of ‘the fine arts’ and later ‘high(brow) culture’, which was perceived as morally better, more civilised and refined, and more complex than ‘common culture’. This is still an accepted way to classify ‘high culture’. During the nineteenth century, though, a new aesthetic logic emerged, that celebrated original and innovative art, in which formal aspects are emphasised over the contents and in which authenticity is hailed. At the same time, the emergence of mass culture industries led to increased critiques on ‘commercial’ art. Both logics, the ‘classic’ one and the ‘modern’ one, seem to mingle in people’s perception of high culture. In recent decades, people increasingly make distinctions within high and low domains, even within (sub)genres. They cross the boundaries between domains that were based on ‘classic’ criteria of seniority and civilisation, by applying ‘modern’ criteria, such as originality and authenticity, for distinctions within these domains. Chapter 7 returns to this idea.

Chapter 3 answers the question whether and how people in the Netherlands actually perceive cultural hierarchy, based on a quantitative analysis of the card ranking question on musical items. Although some people have difficulties with ranking the items and a few even refuse, there is quite a large consensus on both ends of the musical hierarchy: Bach and other classical composers are considered high culture, and some Dutch language singers and contemporary pop artists are positioned at the bottom of the ladder. In between, there are more variations. The mean hierarchy closely resembles the mean taste ranking of older, higher educated respondents. Younger, lower educated people do often produce a similar hierarchy, but it is opposite to their own taste. This implies that low status people recognise the cultural hierarchy, as Bourdieu stated. Still, there are some differences in hierarchical perceptions that can be explained with educational level and age. Young people perceive popular music items from a recent past as higher on the ladder than older people do, sometimes even higher than the people who like these items do. New forms of culture can become canonised after a few decades, which counters static notions of cultural hierarchy and rigid boundaries of high culture.
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That most people perceive a cultural hierarchy, does not mean that they practise it in daily life – or in a sociological interview – nor that they agree with it. Chapter 4 examines such practices and opinions by looking at the qualitative data. On the one hand, hierarchical practices often indeed occur. People look down on others’ tastes (both across and within domains), as well as on the absence of certain tastes, the low frequency of attending cultural activities, low knowledge and wrong attitudes towards art. Furthermore, they also look up to others with a – in their view – better or higher taste, higher frequencies, and so on. Both sides of the hierarchical narrative are more often expressed by the higher educated, who thus perceive themselves on a particular position on the cultural ladder, above and below others. The lower educated participate less in these detailed discussions. The first part of chapter 4 scrutinises this hierarchical narrative in great detail.

However, the second part of the chapter shows that the opposite narrative, egalitarianism, appears to be equally significant. Many people express an individualist view and they reject concepts such as high and low culture for being ‘arrogant’ and ‘elitist’. At first sight, these ideas are more in line with late twentieth century notions on the ‘open’ and ‘tolerant’ attitude of cultural omnivores. However, many people who express egalitarian thoughts do look down on those who do distinguish from others, who are perceived as fake and inauthentic snobs. They distinguish themselves from those who distinguish. As a consequence, they create a moral hierarchy instead, in which the expression of the purely personal taste, the authentic persona, is celebrated. The drawing of ‘symbolic boundaries’ as such (Lamont) seems to be ubiquitous, but people are diverse in the kind of boundaries they draw.

Whereas chapter 4 presents two opposing narratives separately, chapter 5 examines who exactly does and does not use these narratives, and why. Although over twenty respondents limit themselves to the hierarchical narrative and about an equal number to the egalitarian narrative, there is a larger number (about forty) that combines both ‘cultural repertoires’ – as I now call them – during one interview. In a typology I developed, based on the use of the two repertoires, I call them the ambivalent ones. Sometimes they are inconsistent in the course of an interview, but more often they immediately downplay their distinctive remarks. These balance restoring phrases can be explained with the self-presentation people give in a conversation: their sometimes strong distinctive utterances, used in order to present themselves as cultured people with a good taste, must immediately be downplayed when they might be interpreted by the interlocutor as offensive to other people, and hence as arrogant or elitist. These hesitations to disqualify certain others most often occur when discussing others who are perceived as lower on the ladder, who have tastes that strongly deviate from the respondent’s. An important reason for such difficulties with (cultural) inequalities is because people often personally know these people with other tastes, and it even becomes more awkward when the others are family
members. Upwardly mobile people, for instance, are often ambivalent about both their class of origin and their class of destination.

The fourth type in the typology – besides the hierarchical, egalitarian and ambivalent type – is the ‘neutral’ type: those rare respondents who do not use the hierarchical repertoire nor the egalitarian one. This does not mean that they do not classify themselves and others, but they do not use cultural taste for such classifications, nor do they oppose others who do so. They do not reflect on the possible social significance of their and others’ tastes. Their low number in my sample, though, is probably partially caused by the underrepresentation of lower educated and culturally indifferent people.

Chapter 6 leaves people’s valuations of taste differences behind and examines how people explain such differences. Many scholars researched explanatory factors of taste, but this chapter looks at people’s own views on this matter. It first shows that people’s narratives often correspond with sociological notions on the influence of parental background: people were provided with their taste ‘from home’ (van huis uit) and they took it in with the ‘porridge spoon’ (paplepel). However, this does not mean that people often refer to class background when explaining taste differences between them and others. More often, they replace class as an explanatory factor with comparable attributes that are less determined by parental background but that are believed to be personally chosen: educational level, occupation and place of residence. They value individual agency more than structural explanations. Although they clearly recognise parental influence, the meritocratic idea of individual achievement is also strongly anchored in people’s narratives. This also comes to the fore in the narratives of respondents (though a minority) who like, for instance, classical music despite their parents’ lack of interest and despite a lower class background. They refer to cultural education at school and, moreover, to significant others besides parents, such as friends and partners. This chapter also shows how people explain taste differences with other characteristics, such as age and gender.

The final chapter explores which artistic criteria people use to describe their likes and dislikes, as well as to define ‘high culture’ and ‘low culture’ and to rank items hierarchically. Bourdieu distinguished the ‘pure aesthetic’ from the ‘popular aesthetic’. High status people use the former: the inclination to judge works of art purely for its aesthetic qualities, which means preferring form over function, relating the object to other works of art, and favouring complexity. Lower status people, on the other hand, use a popular aesthetic: art should have a function related to daily life, such as a recognisable relation to reality, a moral message or an appeal to the immediate senses. My research shows that the former indeed is true, but that the ‘popular aesthetic’ is applied by respondents of all educational levels; the higher educated are more ‘omnivorous’ in their narratives. The latter apply both the pure aesthetic and more abstract forms of the popular aesthetic not only within the traditional domain of high culture, but also within many
popular culture genres. The social hierarchy nowadays corresponds more with a hierarchy of artistic criteria (across domains) than with a hierarchy of cultural domains. At the same time, however, people more often define cultural hierarchy – whether they reject such a hierarchy or not – by applying the more classic criteria described in chapter 1. More people associate high culture with complex, classical and civilised art, than with original, innovative and authentic art. Their hierarchical practices (based more on the ‘modern logic’) and their hierarchical perceptions (based on the ‘classic logic’) do not fit.

To conclude, many people in the Netherlands – particularly the higher educated – practise cultural hierarchy by distinguishing from, and looking down on, others’ tastes, as well as by looking up. At the same time, many resist such practices and the idea of a cultural hierarchy. Often, they are ambivalent about this; they combine the hierarchical and the anti-hierarchical repertoire or they immediately downplay distinctive remarks. On the other hand, they do define ‘high culture’ and rank items hierarchically when asked, and there is a high consensus – regardless of educational level or age – on the nature of this hierarchy. People practise cultural hierarchy with a ‘modern’ logic (that emerged in the nineteenth century), across the domains of high and low culture that were shaped according to the ‘classic’ logic (that emerged between the sixteenth and nineteenth century). But, because most people still perceive high culture in terms of the classic definition, their distinctive practices do not result in a new ‘high culture’. This has led to confusion on the question whether the relation between cultural hierarchy and distinction has faded or not. I hope this dissertation contributes to clarifying this issue.