

WHAT HAPPENED TO THE CULTURAL ELITES: CONCLUSION

Posts in this series

What Happened To The Cultural Elites: Changes In
The Conditions of Production

What Happened To The Cultural Elites: The
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Symbolic Violence in Neoliberalism This post
describes symbolic structures and cultural
producers, sometimes called symbolic workers.

In this series I tried to figure out why the cultural elites didn't react more strongly to the rise of neoliberalism. When I asked that question in this post I assumed that the cultural elites would see neoliberalism as a threat to their power, especially their ability to reproduce their class without interference because that is the source of their dominance. I got this idea from David Swartz' book *Culture and Power: The Sociology of Pierre Bourdieu*. Writing this series has made me question the assumption, and now I think something else happened.

Early in the book, Swartz shows a graph combining economic and cultural capital. The graph indicates that some people have lots of both, some have lots of one and little of the other, and others have varying amounts of both. The cultural elites might be taken to be the people with the most cultural capital and among them the people with the most economic capital.

The justification for this is that as Bourdieu sees it, cultural capital can be exchanged for economic capital, and the people at the top of many cultural fields have done so and become wealthy. The entertainment industry is a good example. University top executives are another good example. It's less true in some academic fields, but certainly there are many economists who have done so, and people from other fields have too.

In this description, cultural producers are the rest of the people who make a living by employing their cultural capital to create the symbolic structures that people internalize as part of their understanding of society. They are the lower-status academics, lower-ranking employees of the companies that make movies and TV shows, the content producers for newspapers and websites, copy editors and junior ad agency employees, comedy writers for late-night TV shows and sit-coms, most scientists, K-12 teachers and most musicians.

The cultural elites include the top TV and film company executives, top advertising executives, university executives and top editors and publishers of newspapers, and those of similar status in the businesses that produce cultural products. They also include the top individuals who work outside corporations, like top writers, directors, cinematographers, some artists, novelists, scientists and others at the top of their fields. Among this group are the top economists, people like Larry Summers and Gregory Mankiw.

From this perspective, we get to a good explanation for the failure of the cultural elites to oppose neoliberalism. They wound up being winners under the new discourse. They identified their interests with those of the economic elites, not those of the fields that provided them with cultural capital. They used their cultural power to select from the young people in their fields those who supported their views most slavishly, which had the extra

benefit of securing and even increasing their wealth. Bluntly, they don't oppose neoliberalism because they benefit from it.

If cultural producers know what's good for them, they'll do the same thing: support the neoliberal project in an attempt to convert their cultural capital into economic capital. That's particularly true of the younger cultural producers, for the reasons laid out earlier in this series.

There are some groups of cultural producers who can and do safely resist neoliberalism. One group is the people in fields with little potential to convert cultural capital into economic capital, philosophers, musicians and writers, sociologists, anthropologists, and so on. Oh, and content producers who aren't trying to get rich writing on these subjects.

Another group is those actively trying to replace the current group of cultural elites from the outside, by generating new ideas and theories. One example of this group is the MMT theorists; another is the Open Markets Institute. There are a few film makers, a few TV shows, and even an occasional cable news person who does a bit of resistance.

Finally, there are the young. They are in a good position to see the results of neoliberalism, and may provide the energy needed to move away from the dominant neoliberal discourse. There are new voices in the movies, such as Ava Duvernay, Patty Jenkins (Wonder Woman), and Ryan Coogler (Black Panther), among others, who work with good screenwriters and other film artists. There are others in areas of culture I don't follow. There are even some new aspiring politicians, many inspired by Bernie Sanders. I guess we can hope.

That concludes my reading of David Swartz' book. I'm still reading Bourdieu's *Distinctions*, but it's tough going and maybe not of general interest. I'm also reading *How Will Capitalism*

End? By Wolfgang Streeck, a German Economic Sociologist. I'm thinking about making that the next book, but it's so depressing I could barely find a bit of hope for the last paragraph of this series. We'll see.