

CULTURE AND NEOLIBERALISM

My [last series](#) summarizes the state of my neoliberalism project. It turns out that I have mostly focused on the economics of neoliberalism. Another aspect of the project was to learn how we as a society got caught up in neoliberalism. None of the work I've done so far has given me much of an answer to that, let alone the question of how we get out of this mess.

That part was relatively straightforward. I had a basic understanding of how to read and learn about neoliberalism. I have a background in dealing with the actual economy; I knew most of the mainstream economic ideas from College where I took several courses; and from continued readings over the years; and I'm reasonably fluent in college-level math. When it comes to culture as a field of study I'm pretty much at ground zero, and to tell the truth, I was surprised to see the emphasis on culture in Critical Theory. So, this will be a different kind of reading.

I'm going to start with Pierre Bourdieu, a French Sociologist of the second half of the 20th Century. Bourdieu and Foucault are perhaps the best known French thinkers of that period today, as existentialism and indeed most straight philosophy have fallen out of intellectual favor. Their kind of thinking is not that common in the US; we don't exactly have an intellectual class, and we never really valued the life of the mind. We have a lot of experts and a lot of smart and well-trained people, but they are rooted in specific fields, and the number who think usefully beyond their areas is small. Historically, the intellectual was a recognized class in France, and even today many French politicians aspire to the title. Can you imagine a US politician who wants to be thought of that way? We elect regular folk just bursting with common sense, which probably

explains something about our inability to solve problems.

But there is another factor: David Brooks. I read parts of Brooks' New York Times column regularly as a check on my own ambitions. One common form of column is "I read this article and it proves conservatives like me are right and liberals are killing society." Here's a [lovely example](#) of High Brooksism. I think wants to say that neoliberalism is a bad theory because it emphasizes the isolated individual and rejects communal and social values, but he can't because neoliberalism is at the heart of conservatism. Too bad, because it would enable him to criticize Republicans and most Democrats, and it would move him outside the boundaries of "both sides do it" and into an open policy space. But, as he says, people over 56 years old like him are clueless, so we get this absurd conclusion from the incoherent mess above it:

Congressional Republicans think a successful tax bill will thwart populism. Mainstream Democrats think the alienation problem will go away if we redistribute the crumbs a bit more widely. Washington policy wonks build technocratic sand castles that keep getting swept away in the cultural tides.

I absolutely don't want to be like Brooks with his unmoored rationalizations and his pretense of intellectualism. My goal is to see what other people think and try to make sense of it. To that end, I think someone who sees things from a perspective outside my own culture will give me more distance, as was the case with my earlier readings.

I first heard of Bourdieu some time ago, I don't remember where or when, but the gist was that his book *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* was a must-read. Now I want to read it, because some of the issues around taste seem important in the US, where all our

choices seem to define us. But as with Critical Theory, I'm going to start with an overview of Bourdieu to learn some of his basic concepts. So, the next book is David Swartz's *Culture and Power: The Sociology of Pierre Bourdieu*. I've started it, and it seems very readable.

I have a couple of basic thoughts to start with, and we'll see if they hold up.

1. I'm pretty sure that culture isn't the outcome of the economy, as might be the point of early Critical Theory. It seems likely that people's natural creativity just pours out. I read *The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby* by Tom Wolfe years ago, and came away with the idea that the people in that car culture, just like the surfers, the anti-war groups, and the disco dancers in *Saturday Night Fever* were happily living in the shadows of the economy, not straining for success in the broader world, but creating their own milieu with what was at hand. Of course, corporate culture sucked the life out of those cultures, or they died on their own, but the impulse to use the conditions of life in new and inventive ways never dries up. We can watch the process as gaming culture grows up and gets turned into an ESPN sport. I'm sure the kids will be moving on, leaving the olds farther out of touch.

[2, When I was growing up, there was this trope about lowbrow, middle-brow and high-brow taste.](#) We have plenty of classifications of people today: tribalists, angry white people, Evangelicals, Berniecrats; personality types like INTJ, and authoritarian submissives; and of course all the marketing categories, like these in [Wikipedia](#). These characterizations feel ad hoc and instrumental, and no matter how fine the segments are, they hardly seem adequate to the complexities of most of the people I have ever met. But we can't think clearly about a population of 320 million without categories, so some kind of classification seems important.

3. The first book about psychology I read was *I'm OK, You're OK*, by Thomas Anthony Harris. I

thought I knew something when I was done. Then I read some Freud, Jung, Adler and other actual psychologists (badly, I should add), and realized I had been sucked into a pop psych book. It wasn't useless, but close. I want to avoid that. More pointedly, I don't want a system. I think we all come in in the middle, including the Frankfurt School and Bourdieu and Foucault, and try to figure things out as best we can. What I'm looking for is some sort of starting framework that can be used and evaluated and reformed, over and over until it needs replacement by a better framework.

What I don't want is sloppy, disjointed and internally inconsistent thinking, theories unconnected to data, or random collections of data interpreted ideologically. And no thought leaders, whatever the hell they are. And no David Brooks.