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The Hipster in the Mirror

By MARK GREIF

A year ago, my colleagues and I started to investigate the contemporary hipster. What was the “hipster,” and what did it mean to be one? It was a puzzle. No one, it seemed, thought of himself as a hipster, and when someone called you a hipster, the term was an insult. Paradoxically, those who used the insult were themselves often said to resemble hipsters — they wore the skinny jeans and big eyeglasses, gathered in tiny enclaves in big cities, and looked down on mainstream fashions and “tourists.” Most puzzling was how rattled sensible, down-to-earth people became when we posed hipster-themed questions. When we announced a public debate on hipsterism, I received e-mail messages both furious and plaintive. Normally inquisitive people protested that there could be no answer and no definition. Maybe hipsters didn’t exist! The responses were more impassioned than those we’d had in our discussions on health care, young conservatives and feminism. And perfectly blameless individuals began flagellating themselves: “Am I a hipster?”

I wondered if I could guess the root of their pain. It’s a superficial topic, yet it seemed that so much was at stake. Why? Because struggles over taste (and “taste” is the hipster’s primary currency) are never *only* about taste. I began to wish that everyone I talked to had read just one book to give these fraught debates a frame: “Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste,” by Pierre Bourdieu.

A French sociologist who died in 2002 at age 71, Bourdieu is sometimes wrongly associated with postmodern philosophers. But he did share with other post-1968 French thinkers a wish to show that lofty philosophical ideals couldn’t be separated from the conflicts of everyday life. Subculture had not been his area, precisely, but neither would hipsters have been beneath his notice.

He came from a family of peasants in the foothills of the Pyrenees. His father was elevated by a job in the village post office — although he always emphasized that he had attained his position by being neither better nor different. Pierre, as a child, was elevated yet more drastically by the school system. He so distinguished himself in the classroom that he was carried to studies at the École Normale Supérieure in Paris. This was the pinnacle of French intellect, the path of Sartre

and Maurice Merleau-Ponty.

Yet Bourdieu chose to make it his life's work to debunk the powerful classes' pretensions that they were more deserving of authority or wealth than those below. He aimed his critiques first at his own class of elites — professors and intellectuals — then at the media, the political class and the propertied class.

“Distinction,” published in 1979, was an undisputed masterwork. In it, Bourdieu set out to show the social logic of taste: how admiration for art, appreciation of music, even taste in food, came about for different groups, and how “superior” taste was not the result of an enchanted superiority in scattered individuals.

This may seem a long way from Wellington-booted and trucker-hatted American youth in gentrifying neighborhoods. But Bourdieu's innovation, applicable here, was to look beyond the traditional trappings of rich or poor to see battles of symbols (like those boots and hats) traversing all society, reinforcing the class structure just as money did.

Over several years in the 1960s, Bourdieu and his researchers surveyed 1,200 people of all classes and mined government data on aspects of French domestic life. They asked, for instance, Which of the following subjects would be most likely to make a beautiful photograph? and offered such choices as a sunset, a girl with a cat or a car crash. From government dietary research, they took data on the classic question: Do you think French people eat too much? The statistical results were striking. The things you prefer — tastes that you like to think of as personal, unique, justified only by sensibility — correspond tightly to defining measures of social class: your profession, your highest degree and your father's profession.

The power of Bourdieu's statistics was to show how rigid and arbitrary the local conformities were. In American terms, he was like an updater of Thorstein Veblen, who gave us the idea of “conspicuous consumption.” College teachers and artists, unusual in believing that a beautiful photo could be made from a car crash, began to look conditioned to that taste, rather than sophisticated or deep. White-collar workers who defined themselves by their proclivity to eat only light foods — as opposed to farmworkers, who weren't ashamed to treat themselves to “both cheese and a dessert” — seemed not more refined, but merely more conventional.

Taste is not stable and peaceful, but a means of strategy and competition. Those superior in wealth use it to pretend they are superior in spirit. Groups closer in social class who yet draw their status from different sources use taste and its attainments to disdain one another and get a leg up. These conflicts for social dominance through culture are exactly what drive the dynamics within communities whose members are regarded as hipsters.

Once you take the Bourdieuan view, you can see how hipster neighborhoods are crossroads where young people from different origins, all crammed together, jockey for social gain. One hipster subgroup's strategy is to disparage others as "liberal arts college grads with too much time on their hands"; the attack is leveled at the children of the upper middle class who move to cities after college with hopes of working in the "creative professions." These hipsters are instantly declassified, reservoirs in abject internships and ignored in the urban hierarchy — but able to use college-taught skills of classification, collection and appreciation to generate a superior body of cultural "cool."

They, in turn, may malign the "trust fund hipsters." This challenges the philistines possessed of money but not the nose for culture, convert real capital into "cultural capital" (Bourdieu's most famous coinage), acquiring subculture as if it were ready-to-wear. (Paris Hilton in her trucker hat.)

Both groups, meanwhile, look down on the couch-surfing, old-clothes-wearing hipsters who seem most authentic but are also often the most socially precarious — the lower-middle-class young, moving up through style, but with no backstop of parental culture or family capital. They are the bartenders and boutique clerks who wait on their well-to-do peers and wealthy tourists. Only on the basis of their cool clothes can they be "superior": hipster knowledge compensates for economic immobility.

All hipsters play at being the inventors or first adopters of novelties: pride comes from knowing, and deciding, what's cool in advance of the rest of the world. Yet the habits of hatred and accusation are endemic to hipsters because they feel the weakness of everyone's position — including their own. Proving that someone is trying desperately to boost himself instantly undoes him as an opponent. He's a fake, while you are a natural aristocrat of taste. That's why "He's not for real, he's just a hipster" is a potent insult among all the people identifiable as hipsters themselves.

The attempt to analyze the hipster provokes such universal anxiety because it calls everyone's bluff. And hipsters aren't the only ones unnerved. Many of us try to justify our privileges by pretending that our superb tastes and intellect prove we deserve them, reflecting our inner superiority. Those below us economically, the reasoning goes, don't appreciate what we do; similarly, they couldn't fill our jobs, handle our wealth or survive our difficulties. Of course this is a terrible lie. And Bourdieu devoted his life to exposing it. Those who read him in effect become responsible to him — forced to admit a failure to examine our own lives, down to the seeming trivialities of clothes and distinction that, as Bourdieu revealed, also structure our world.



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