

Peter Stamatov

***State Socialist Omnivores: Distinction Through Leisure Activities in
Czechoslovakia, 1984.***

Tentative title. Paper prepared for the Graduate Student Retreat for Comparative Research organized by the Society for Comparative Research/Center for Comparative Social Analysis, UCLA, May 8-9, 1999, Los Angeles. Draft, March 1999. Please do not cite without permission. I wish to thank Mabel Berezin and Donald Treiman for generous help and comments in the writing of this draft. Email: stamatov@ucla.edu.

Theoretical Considerations: The Recent Sociology of Cultural Consumption

Ever since Max Weber's (1968) classical discussion, life style—or as Weber's original concept has it: conduct of life—has been considered by sociologists an important way in which differences and inequality between social groups are created and defined. An important ingredient of life style practices is what can be broadly defined as cultural consumption. There has been an impressive body of sociological literature focusing on the way in which particulars of cultural consumption are part and parcel of the way in which status distinctions are created and maintained in everyday life.

The contribution of a concept of cultural consumption to a better understanding of the dynamics of social inequalities can be seen in at least two interrelated aspects. First, focus on consumption shifts researchers' interest from production, industrial work practices and concomitant income inequalities as the main site of social differentiation and possibly class struggles. This focus thus carves out an area of study which complements and enriches Marxian approaches by investigating areas of social life where the creation and perpetuation of inequalities are less visible and recognizable as such and can be all the more subtle and potentially more pernicious. And second, the concept of cultural consumption allows for the incorporation into theoretical constructs of important factors such as the activities and subjectivities of consumers.

Cultural consumption is then a concept that covers a wide set of meaningful practices and dispositions among different populations. It thus emphasizes the constant creation and usage of cultural meanings in the multiple acts of people's encounters and engagements with cultural products and practices of various sorts. The extension of the

model of aesthetic consumption to everyday non-elite practices, as Pierre Bourdieu (1984, 100) has argued, has

the virtue of reminding us that the consumption of goods no doubt always presupposes a labour of appropriation, to different degrees depending on the goods and the consumers; or, more precisely, that the consumer helps to produce the product he [sic] consumes, by a labour of identification and decoding which, in the case of a work of art, may constitute the whole of the consumption and gratification, and which requires time and dispositions acquired over time.

The analytical focus on cultural consumption has produced an impressive body of research and theorizing. One could summarize the findings of this recent sociology of culture in three general proposition on the ways in which differences in consumption of cultural products are employed to create boundaries between status groups. A first line of research has investigated how upper classes consume prestigious cultural products and—consequently—how the consumption of less prestigious products is relegated to lower social classes (Bourdieu 1984). The social fact of differential consumption is supported by the appropriation by ruling classes of the power to define what constitutes legitimate high culture and by their ability to create the institutional basis for controlling access to it (Bourdieu 1989; DiMaggio and Useem 1982).

Another body of sociological research has emphasized the differences between classes and status groups in the volume and variety of cultural products consumed (Peterson and Kern 1996; Peterson and Simkus 1992). Higher status goes hand in hand, in this view, with a more diverse set of cultural products consumed. And finally, sociologists have paid attention to differences in modalities of consumption. Different classes and status group consume with different motives and employ different strategies of consumption (Bourdieu 1984; Holt 1997).

Although analytically distinct, the findings of all these three major directions of research I have outlined here describe processes and regularities which are closely interrelated in the actual practices of consumers in different cultures. For example, it is precisely because they possess the symbolic resource to consecrate genres and practices as legitimate and to employ more sophisticated strategies of consumption that higher status individuals are able to cross stylistic boundaries and enjoy cultural practices that are otherwise defined as “lowbrow.” In other words, higher status goes hand in hand not only with relatively more material and symbolic resources (of which perhaps income and free time are the most important) but also with the privilege of choice and variety. In turn, the ability of high status individuals to engage in more prestigious and variegated cultural practices embeds them in more and wider social networks (Erickson 1996) which facilitate the access to more and better resources (Granovetter 1973).

Distinction Through Differential Repertoires of Cultural Consumption

This paper builds on the insights of recent sociology of cultural consumption summarized in the previous section in an attempt to better understand the creation and maintenance of status distinction through differential repertoires of consumption. The best analytical inroad into these problems is offered by Richard Peterson’s theoretical and empirical work (See Peterson 1997; Peterson and Kern 1996; Peterson and Simkus 1992). In Peterson’s view, status boundaries are increasingly marked not by—or not exclusively by—the differences in the kind of cultural products consumed by different status group. Instead, high status individuals are characterized by a wider volume of genres they appreciate and like. In other words it is the different composition, volume, and variety of

what can be called “repertoires of cultural consumption” that form the base for status differentiation. Whereas lower status group are likely to be exclusive and one-sided in their cultural preferences (Bryson 1997), higher status is characterized by a certain eclecticism in taste which Peterson aptly names “omnivorous.”

Empirically, Peterson has tested his hypothesis on contemporary U.S. populations with regard to their preferences for different musical genres. In this paper I draw on this “omnivore hypothesis” but I also introduce two important modifications to it. First, I expand the hypothesis beyond the narrow scope of musical tastes. Second, I apply the hypothesis to state socialist Czechoslovakia of 1984. I discuss these two modifications in detail in the following subsections.

a) Leisure as Measure of Diversity of Cultural Repertoires

Whereas musical tastes have been traditionally considered to provide a reliable measure of cultural dispositions and practices and thus have provided a convenient indicator, one may argue that they only shed light on a rather limited subset of patterns of cultural consumption in which people engage. My measure of “omnivorousness” is therefore based on a wider set of leisure activities. Whereas the reliability of this indicator—similarly to the case the traditional indicators based on musical or aesthetic preferences—depends on several assumptions which I discuss below, its employment does not violate the spirit of the hypothesis that higher status is related to more diverse repertoires of cultural consumption. I expect then that persons of higher socioeconomic status engage in *more* kinds of leisure activities than people of relatively lower socioeconomic status.

The social and cognitive preconditions for this greater volume in repertoires can be manifold. Higher status gives more material resources and time. Higher status individuals have also the necessary dispositions or cultural capital that would allow them at least in principle to be able to engage in a more variegated set of consumption practices than someone with lower status. And finally, higher status individuals would not necessarily shy away from engaging in what may be considered “lowbrow” practices since they usually have the symbolic and cognitive resource to justify this engagement in various way. Note that their situation is thus diametrically opposed to lower status individuals who simply lack the necessary material resources and free time to engage in “highbrow” activities even if they possess the cognitive disposition to wish to engage in them.

b) Omnivores beyond the United States

My second extension of the “omnivore hypothesis” involves its application to a case distinct from Peterson’s USA. Bourdieu’s magisterial *Distinction* has inspired a lot of research on social inequalities in cultural consumption in different settings (See e.g. Böröcz and Southworth 1996; De Graaf 1991; DeNora 1991; DiMaggio and Useem 1982; Halle 1993; Holt 1997; Lamont 1992; Lieberman and Bell 1992). I am not aware however of similar works trying to measure differences in cultural repertoires between different status groups outside of the United States.

My empirical case is state socialist Czechoslovakia of 1984. This provides a setting that may be considered radically different from the one where Peterson has tested his hypothesis: the United States in the 1980s and 1990s. Czechoslovakia of 1984 is very

different for two reasons. Apart for, first, being—or having been—a European country, Czechoslovakia of the mid-1980s was a state socialist country.

That different strata in East Central European societies under state socialism might in fact have unequal access to cultural products was only admitted reluctantly and with qualifications by the ruling ideologies of socialist states. Even critical observers have conceded the relative openness of state socialism to social mobility especially when compared to the seemingly more rigid social reproductive structures of West European capitalist democracies (Parkin 1971).

Furthermore, the political and economic framework of state socialism—unlike postindustrial consumerist capitalism in the West—did not provide an abundance of different cultural goods and multiplying cultural markets. Instead, the supply of cultural products was rather impoverished (Verdery 1996). This has lead ironically to a curious application of critical theorists' denunciation of mass capitalism to the dynamics of state socialism. In this view state socialist regimes were credited with powerfully engineering its subject populations' needs and tastes (Fehér, Heller and Márkus 1983). Yet as Verdery observes, the scarcity of products in state socialism paradoxically gave a lot of significance to consumption practices in people's lives.

What implications has the state socialist origin of my data for my theoretical question? The main implication, I believe, is that my hypothesis of higher status individuals tending to engage in more practices of cultural consumption will have even stronger support if the data demonstrate distinctions in consumption patterns between socioeconomic groups in a society that was putatively egalitarian and non-consumerist.

Data, Variables. and Method

My data come from the The Czechoslovak Lifestyle Survey administered in 1984. It is comprised of a 1/3 random subsample (N=6,400) of a larger research project, “Social and Class Structure of Czechoslovakia” conducted by the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences and the Central Statistical Office in Prague.¹

As an approximate measure of variety of cultural consumption I have constructed a scale whose value for each respondent denotes the respondent’s reported engagement in sixteen leisure activities on which the survey provides information. These activities—in the form of the original variable labels and their corresponding means and standard deviations—are listed in Table 1.² The scale was constructed in the following way: Each respondent scored 1 on each of the leisure activities if they reported to practice it at least “less frequently” (at least “once a month” for responses on the “weekend trip” question). If respondent reported “never” as an answer, they were assigned a score of 0.

Constructed in this way, this scale rests on several assumption. First, in order to interpret the respondent’s score on the scale as a reliable indicator of the volume and variety of their cultural consumption one must assume that the enumerated leisure

¹ Recently I have obtained the data full sized sample but have not been able to analyze them. I however do not expect the results to differ significantly. Mainly because of the political transformations and the break up of Czechoslovakia I have not been able to obtain so far the official clearance needed to work with the data set.

² At this point I have not been able to obtain a copy of the actual questionnaire which would allow me to judge somewhat more adequately the actual scope of the activities covered in the survey.

activities cover relatively well the universe of possible and available practices in the respondents' everyday life. Second, the scale excludes any information on the relative prestige of any of the enumerated practices. Neither does it contain any information on the frequency with which individual practice any of the activities.

To measure the social determinants of variety of cultural consumption I have used ordinary least square regression. The respondents' scores on the scale of cultural consumption variety have been regressed on other selected characteristics of the respondents. The dependent and independent variables along with their values, means, and standard deviations are described in Table 2.

The use of this technique in this context introduces another assumption: the assumption that distances between scores on the scale are equal. To transcend this assumption one could use multinomial logistic regression. The relatively size of the scale (from 0 to 16) however diminishes the impact of interval size on results. This coupled with the fact that ordinary least square regression results are much easier to interpret than the results from multinomial regression justify in my view the use of least square regression as an economic tool to discover relevant structures in the data.

Since I predict that the volume and variety of respondents' repertoires of cultural consumption will depend in a non-trivial way on their social status, I have introduced into the model a series of independent variables that measure different components of social status. Much research has demonstrated the dependence of cultural consumption on non-economic characteristics. Correspondingly, two series of independent dummy variables in my model serve as measures for the respondent's cultural capital: level of education and level of father's education. Whereas the first of them is a measure of respondent's

institutionalized and embodied cultural capital (Bourdieu 1983), the second variable is a measure of the family “inheritance” in terms of cultural capital. The economic capital of the respondents is measured by the amount of their annual income in Czechoslovak Crowns. Since individual’s income is not necessarily the best indicator of the respondent’s economic capital, I have conceptualized income as the per capita income of the household where the respondent lives.

One can plausibly hypothesize that there is a series of factors distinct from cultural and economic capital which influence cultural consumption. To account for these I use several dummy variables which are meant to capture several structural determinants: the respondents’ marital status, place of residence, and number of dependent children. All these structural factors may in one way or another influence the volume of the individual’s cultural consumption. Thus married people and people with dependent children are likely to be moderate in the levels of cultural consumption compared to people who are not married and people with no children. The level of cultural consumption can also be influenced by the respondent’s place of residence as major cities, for example, offer more and various possibilities for different leisure activities compared to rural or small town settings. Finally, I expect the two characteristic of gender and age to influence the levels of cultural consumption. In a patriarchal society, women, especially married ones, are more likely to be socialized to sacrifice leisure for “obligations” like household chores. Similarly, I expect that with increasing age people would tend to engage in a smaller number of activities compared to younger people. This may occur not only because of decreased physical mobility but

also because of heavy social expectations that elderly people should not lead a life which is as active as the one of younger mature individuals.

Finally, two independent variables are directly related to the peculiarities of Czechoslovak setting where the data were collected. One of them designates the respondent's residence in Slovakia. The different historical trajectories of the Czech lands and Slovakia resulted in differential patterns of development in the two respective territories almost up to the creation of post-WWII Czechoslovakia. I expect these differences to persist as late as 1984 at least on the level of existing infrastructure for cultural consumption. Since the data come from a state socialist society I have measured the respondent's affiliation with the Communist Party in two variables: one designating rank and file members, and the other one designating functionaries. Intuitively, one would expect party functionaries to have more access to leisure activities compared to non-members and rank and file members. At least one piece of research, however, suggest that low party rank might have been an important route for social mobility in state socialist Hungary (Böröcz and Southworth 1996). I thus expect Communist party members to engage in more activities than none member. Within the members of the party however I expect low rank members to be engaged in more activities than high functionaries.

Results

How did different social characteristics influence respondent's level of cultural consumption in state socialist Czechoslovakia? The results of multivariate analysis are

presented in Table 3. The set of independent variables in the model account for more than 43 percent of the variation in respondent's scores on volume of cultural consumption which suggest a non-trivial relationship between the respondent's social position and the number of leisure activities in which the respondent engages. This is confirmed also by the strong negative value of the Bayesian coefficient.

The regression coefficients of the respondent's level of education support my prediction that levels and variety of cultural consumption will depend on cultural capital. The net effects of father's education are weaker but significant. One can conclude then that possession of cultural capital not only facilitates consumption and appreciation of "highbrow" genres and activities—a standard finding in research on cultural consumption (DiMaggio and Useem 1982)—but also predisposes toward a more varied repertoire of consumption practices. This dependence may be considered an important way in which cultural capital is being converted into social capital (Bourdieu 1983). Engaging in more activities embeds individuals in more distinct social networks and in turn gives them access to more resources that are otherwise unattainable for persons with relatively smaller repertoires.³

Economic capital—expressed as annual income—is not a strong predictor of variety of cultural consumption. When seen in conjunction with the coefficients of respondent's education and respondent's father's education, this result—in agreement with Bourdieu's sociology of culture—suggest that volume of cultural consumption is

³ I leave aside the question of whether "omnivore" consumption is a relatively new phenomenon as Peterson (1997) argues. More historical research providing evidence that is more robust than Peterson's references to cultural elite opinion is needed to support or refute his claim.

more a matter of inculcated and embodied dispositions than simply a matter of material resources and conspicuous consumption.

Other structural variables seem to have the predicted effect on levels of cultural consumption. Both gender and age are likely to influence the amount of leisure activities in which people engage. Women's repertoires are more limited compared to those of men, as are elderlies' repertoires compared to those of younger people. The need to take care of dependent children limits predictably the volume of cultural consumption. More interesting are the predicted net effects of marital statuses other than single. Not only married but divorced and widowed people engage in relatively smaller number of activities than singles. This can in part be attributed to childcare obligations that divorced and widowed people are more likely to have. More importantly, however, one may hypothesize that the more limited cultural consumption repertoires of divorced and widowed people are result of social expectations that individuals in their stages of the life course should not engage in cultural consumption to the extent single individuals do.

The expectation that territorial differences are important in influencing cultural consumption repertoires is borne out by the evidence, too. Clearly, the most privileged in territorial aspect were the inhabitants of large cities, and the lesser extent the residents of the Czech Lands. Membership in the Communist Party, too, predicts higher level of variety of cultural consumption. Whereas the coefficient for rank and file members is not significant, party functionaries in this model are clearly shown to enjoy somewhat more extended repertoires of cultural consumption. In agreement with theories of "the new class" (Djilas 1957) this finding suggest that party apparatchiks enjoyed more privileges than the ordinary population. Yet it must be added that one important implication of

these privileges—beyond mere conspicuous consumption—is the potential for inclusion in diverse networks that the practicing of more leisure activities provided for Communist Party functionaries.

What is the general picture that emerges from this multivariate model? First, the model supports the hypothesis that volume and variety of cultural consumption increases with higher social status. Respondents who scored higher on almost all variables measuring aspects of status situation are predicted to engage in more leisure activities. And second, these results suggest that life style was an important dimension along which inequalities were structured in state socialist society. A possible line of research that the present findings suggest would be to trace the impact of differential volumes of cultural consumption in the course of the East Central European transformations after 1989. If the contention that higher volumes of cultural consumption are important because they insert individuals in more social networks and thus provide them indirectly with access to more resources is correct, one could investigate the impact of personal patterns of consumption on social mobility in the turbulent times of post-communist transformation.

Table 1. List of Leisure Activities Included in Respondent's Answers, Czechoslovak Adults, 1984 (N=6151)

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation
Jogging and Exercising	.422	1.156
Attending Pop Music Concerts, Discos and Other Dancing Establishments	.425	.815
Active Athletic Activities	.435	1.101
Attending Theater Performances, Classical Music Concerts and Art Exhibits	.499	.815
Attending Sports Events	.565	1.069
Frequenting Restaurants, Pubs, etc.	.626	1.123
Self-Education Activities (Classes, Public Lectures, etc.)	.654	1.389
Attending Cinema	.862	1.096
Partying with Friends and Visiting Neighbors	1.651	1.366
Weekend Trips	1.978	1.747
Reading Fiction	2.146	1.983
Practicing Hobbies	2.229	2.067
House, Weekend House or Car Maintenance	2.260	2.086
Reading Newspapers, Magazines and Journals	3.151	2.091
Watching TV	4.499	1.550
Walks and Trips*	.655	.476

Note: Responses were coded from 0 (never) to 7 (2 hours a day or more). Values were weighted for household size.

* Responses were coded 0 (no) and 1 (yes)

Table 2. Value Labels, Means, and Standard Deviations of Dependent and Independent Variables.

Variable	Values	Mean	Standard Deviation
Score on Scale of Cultural Consumption		8.106	3.237
Vocational Education	0=no, 1=yes	.363	.481
Secondary Education	0=no, 1=yes	.219	.413
Higher Education	0=no, 1=yes	.0574	.233
Father's Secondary Education	0=no, 1=yes	.271	.444
Father's Vocational Education	0=no, 1=yes	.102	.303
Father's Higher Education	0=no, 1=yes	.0394	.195
Annual Income in Czechoslovak Crowns		17981	7340
Communist Party Member	0=no, 1=yes	.0885	.284
Communist Party Functionary	0=no, 1=yes	.0529	.224
Resident of Slovakia	0=no, 1=yes	.3699	.483
Female	0=no, 1=yes	.527	.499
Age		41.003	16.560
Married	0=no, 1=yes	.717	.450
Divorced	0=no, 1=yes	.0362	.187
Widowed	0=no, 1=yes	.0707	.256
1 dependent Child	0=no, 1=yes	.152	.359
2 Dependent Children	0=no, 1=yes	.238	.426
3 Dependent Children	0=no, 1=yes	.0826	.275
4 Dependent Children	0=no, 1=yes	.0243	.154
Resident of Major City	0=no, 1=yes	.168	.374
Resident of Town of at least 10,000 Inhabitants	0=no, 1=yes	.307	.461
Resident of Small Town	0=no, 1=yes	.103	.303
Resident of Village in Urban Agglomerate	0=no, 1=yes	.0445	.206
Resident of Rural Center	0=no, 1=yes	.137	.343

Table 2. Regression Effects on Number of Leisure Activities Practiced, Czechoslovak Adults, 1984 (N=6151)

Variable	Coefficient	Standard Error	P Value	Standardized Coefficient
Vocational Education	.717	.080	.000	.107
Secondary Education	2.053	.094	.000	.262
Higher Education	2.870	.158	.000	.206
Father's Vocational Education	.491	.080	.000	.0680
Father's Secondary Education	.612	.116	.000	.0573
Father's Higher Education	.954	.177	.000	.0572
Annual Income in Czechoslovak Crowns	.0000377	-	.000	.0855
Communist Party Functionary	.818	.146	.000	.0566
Communist Party Member	.139	.112	.218	.0121
Resident of Slovakia	-.512	.0687	.000	-.0763
Female	-.770	.0676	.000	-.119
Age	-.0719	.00313	.000	-.368
Married	-.642	.134	.000	-.0892
Divorced	-.666	.208	.001	-.0384
Widowed	-.803	.197	.000	-.0637
1 dependent Child	-.2803	.111	.011	-.0311
2 Dependent Children	-.127	.109	.242	-.0167
3 Dependent Children	-.0666	.141	.637	-.00566
4 Dependent Children	-.8500	.221	.000	-.04039
Resident of Major City	.916	.106	.000	.106
Resident of Town of at least 10,000 Inhabitants	.694	.0885	.000	.0989
Resident of Small Town	.644	.118	.000	.0603
Resident of Village in Urban Agglomerate	.10507	.161	.515	.0070
Resident of Rural Center	.353	.1058	.001	.0374
Constant	9.962			
Adjusted R	.431			
BIC	-3285.317			

References

- Böröcz, József, and Caleb Southworth. 1996. "Decomposing the Intellectuals' Class Power: Conversion of Cultural Capital to Income, Hungary 1986." *Social Forces* 74:797-821.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1983. "The Forms of Capital." Pp. 241-58 in *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, edited by John G. Richardson. New York: Greenwood.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1984. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1989. "Social Space and Symbolic Power." *Sociological Theory* 7:14-25.
- Bryson, Bethany. 1997. "What about the Univores? Musical Dislikes and Group-Based Identity Construction among Americans with Low Levels of Education." *Poetics* 25:141-56.
- De Graaf, Nan Dirk. 1991. "Distinction by Consumption in Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and the Netherlands." *European Sociological Review* 7:267-90.
- DeNora, Tia. 1991. "Musical Patronage and Social Change in Beethoven's Vienna." *American Journal of Sociology* 97:310-46.
- DiMaggio, Paul, and Michael Useem. 1982. "The Arts in Class Reproduction." Pp. 181-201 in *Cultural and Economic Reproduction in Education*, edited by Michael Apple. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Djilas, Milovan. 1957. *The New Class: An Analysis of the Communist System*. London: Thames and Hudson.
- Erickson, Bonnie H. 1996. "Culture, Class, and Connections." *American Journal of Sociology* 102:217-51.
- Fehér, Ferenc, Ágnes Heller, and György Márkus. 1983. *Dictatorship over Needs: An Analysis of Soviet Societies*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Granovetter, Mark. 1973. "The Strength of Weak Ties." *American Journal of Sociology* 78.
- Halle, David. 1993. *Inside Culture: Art and Class in the American Home*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Holt, Douglas B. 1997. "Distinction in America? Recovering Bourdieu's Theory of Tastes from Its Critics." *Poetics* 25:93-120.
- Lamont, Michele. 1992. *Money, Morals, and Manners: The Culture of the French and the American Upper-Middle Class*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Lieberson, Stanley, and Eleanor O. Bell. 1992. "Children's First Names: An Empirical Study of Social Taste." *American Journal of Sociology* 98:511-54.
- Parkin, Frank. 1971. *Class Inequality and Political Order: Social Stratification in Capitalist and Communist Societies*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- Peterson, Richard A. 1997. "The Rise and Fall of Highbrow Snobbery as a Status Marker." *Poetics* 25:75-92.
- Peterson, Richard A., and Roger M. Kern. 1996. "Changing Highbrow Taste: From Snob to Omnivore." *American Sociological Review* 61:900-907.

- Peterson, Richard A., and Albert Simkus. 1992. "How Musical Tastes Mark Occupational Status Groups." Pp. 152-86 in *Cultivating Differences; Symbolic Boundaries and the Making of Inequality*, edited by Michele Lamont and Marcel Fournier. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Verdery, Katherine. 1996. *What Was Socialism, and What Comes Next?* Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Weber, Max. 1968. *Economy and Society: An Outline in Interpretive Sociology*. Berkeley: University of California Press.