Conspicuous Openness to Diversity:
Implications for Cultural Minorities

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This paper presents a critical examination of the rhetoric of openness to diversity in the fields of tastes and politics. With regard to tastes, we examine current sociological research which shows an increasing polarization between highly educated and wealthy cultural "omnivores" (Peterson 1992), who report preferences for, and participation in, a broad range of cultural genres and activities, and less educated cultural "univores" whose tastes and practices are more restricted. With regard to politics, we focus on current debates about cosmopolitanism (Beck 1999, Bruckner 1996, Hollinger 2001, Pollock et al. 2000), which present competing visions of how to accommodate diversity in national and international political arenas.

Drawing a parallel between the rhetoric of openness to diversity in these two fields, we present three conjectures or working hypotheses.1 Following the work of Richard Peterson (1992) and others (Bryson 1996, Erickson, 1996, Coulangeon 2003), our first conjecture is that the praise of broad and eclectic tastes among cultural elites is symptomatic of the emergence of a new type of legitimate culture, which prescribes new criteria for defining what is desirable and undesirable in the acquisition of culture. Rather than being based on tastes for a limited range of high status cultural products, the new legitimate culture values knowledge of, and tastes for, a wide array of multicultural objects and practices (Bryson 2006) which include high culture but are not restricted to it.

Our second conjecture goes one step further to propose that this new legitimate culture is part of a larger discursive configuration based on a series of binary oppositions between terms such as diverse, open, eclectic, global, cosmopolitan, educated, enlightened, dominant, and desirable on the one hand, and terms such as unitary, local, closed upon itself, uneducated,

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1 We use the term conjecture here in the popperian sense of bold hypotheses developed on the basis of incomplete evidence and which need to be tested in research.

regressive, dominated, and undesirable on the other. Finally, our third conjecture is that the oppositions between open and closed, as well as that between diverse and unitary, function as ideological codes (Alexander and Smith 1993, Smith 1999), that is, as rhetorical devices used by social agents to challenge or sustain unequal relations of power. The rhetoric of openness to diversity in the fields of taste and in the realm of politics produces remarkably similar ideological effects. Conspicuous openness to diversity (Fridman and Ollivier 2002), we argue, constitutes a new type of cultural capital (Bourdieu 1979), in the sense of a set of cultural attitudes widely considered as desirable but whose conditions of appropriation are unequally distributed. This legitimate culture presents as desirable values and attitudes which are more closely linked to the cultural resources of privileged groups. In current debates about cosmopolitanism, groups occupying a privileged position in a given field often find themselves in a better position to define their own cultural production and attitudes as open, eclectic, and global while defining the culture of disadvantaged groups with whom they are in conflict as regressive, closed, and local.

1. First conjecture: Openness to diversity is a new legitimate culture

With the publication of *Distinction*, in 1979, Pierre Bourdieu placed the study of tastes at the centre of sociological analysis. As a component of cultural capital, tastes are for him an essential part of processes of class identification, exclusion, and reproduction. Bourdieu=s concept of cultural capital rests on the assumption that a unified and hegemonic set of evaluative standards, reflecting the social position and aesthetic dispositions of dominant classes, imposes itself as legitimate culture in a given society. Bourdieu=s conception of legitimate culture is

largely based on the Enlightenment vision of culture as a learning process. In this perspective, the canonical works of high culture represent the highest achievement of humankind and familiarity with them is the key to a moral and rational life. Legitimate culture is transmitted in institutions such as schools, museums, concert halls, and cultural media. It functions as a means of class domination by virtue of two main properties: the acquisition of legitimate culture is widely accepted as desirable, but the conditions of its appropriation are not equally distributed.

Bourdieu=s critics argue that it is no longer possible to envision the existence of a single, unified, and hegemonic legitimate culture. The last decades of the 20th century have witnessed a considerable erosion of the boundaries between high and popular culture, as high culture institutions gradually adopted the marketing strategies of commercial mass culture and some popular genres such as comic books and pop music borrowed the complex languages and stylization of form commonly associated with high culture. In a process celebrated by some (Lipovetsky 1994) and lamented by others (Bloom 1987, Finkielkraut 1995), the Enlightenment ideal of liberal arts education has been seriously challenged on university campuses by feminist, poststructuralist, postcolonial, and queer activists seeking to undermine the dominance of white male bourgeois standards and to ensure greater recognition of minority cultures. As a result, contemporary tastes are seen either as fragmented along a multiplicity of localised spaces of distinction (Hall 1992), or as an expression of individual preferences and private choices (Lipovetsky 1994). Being reduced to an array of local currencies with no significance outside specific social settings, cultural capital no longer serves as a basis of class domination.

Current research on tastes, however, presents a different picture. Studies of cultural preferences conducted in several countries, on different topics, and using different methodologies

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consistently show that high socioeconomic status respondents report preferences for, and participation in, the broadest range of cultural genres and activities, while low status respondents display more restricted tastes and practices (Peterson 1992; Donnat 1994; Bryson 1996; Erickson 1996, Holt 1998; Warde, Martens and Olsen 1999). High-status respondents tend to report tastes which are more diverse, eclectic, exotic, and cosmopolitan.

On the basis of these findings, Richard Peterson (1992) argues that new rules of distinction are replacing old ones. The model of the educated person is no longer the snob, displaying an exclusive taste for high culture and shunning commercial mass culture. Rather, the new ideal is represented by the omnivore, who displays tastes for a diversity of cultural objects and practices, which include high culture but are not restricted to it. In a world where hierarchies are unstable and boundaries have eroded, *conspicuous openness to diversity* has replaced conspicuous consumption of economically or culturally rare goods as a means of distinction (Fridman and Ollivier 2002). Going one step further, we argue in the following section that the rhetoric of openness to diversity is part of a larger discursive configuration which manifests itself in different areas of social life. The opposition between diverse and unitary, as well as that between open and closed, are fast becoming one of the master cultural schemas of our times, functioning as a powerful instrument of social classification and evaluation..

2. Second conjecture: Conspicuous openness to diversity is part of a new discursive configuration in culture and politics

In a series of newspaper articles about well-known cultural and media personalities in Québec, the author systematically emphasized the eclectic nature of their tastes. Speaking of

songwriter Luc Plamondon, he states: ALuc loves dark ruins and phantom villages as much as luxury and sun-filled hotels; (Y) he likes peanut butter as much as caviar, brutal and dirty megacities as much as a cabin in the woods.@ (Germain 2001a). His article on a news anchorman is titled: AFrom cello to rap@ in reference to the different types of music played by the anchorman during the interview (Germain 2001b). Performance artist Lewis Furrey is described as a Acultural junkie@, who in a single day will easily go from Bach to Eminem, from the movie *Gladiator* to the classical play *Andromaque*, from Harlequin novels to classical literature published in the prestigious French *Pléiade* collection (Germain 2001c). These articles, I argue, not only describe the tastes of particular individuals. They also have normative effects, since they present eclectic tastes in a positive way, as a defining attribute of cultural elites.

Similarly, in a recent report on the cultural practices of young people produced by the Québec government, the authors state in their introduction:

> The capacity of Québec society to adapt to the profound changes which affect all industrialised countries depends both on the qualifications acquired by its population and on its collective capacity to **be open to the world**. Who better than youth, with its creativity, dynamism, and spirit of innovation, is able to face these new realities? Which platform, aside from culture, offers a better opportunity to activate this potential? The **cultural practices** of young people, **rich and diversified**, constitute a **major asset** for the **economic and social development** of Québec. (Séguin-Noel and Garon 2000, free translation and emphasis added)

This text presents in a nutshell several elements of the new rhetoric of diversity. We are told, first, that the capacity of Québec society to thrive in a changing world depends on the degree of openness of its population; second, that culture, which in the report includes a wide range of activities from watching television and reading to visiting museums, attending concerts, and surfing the Net, is a privileged means of acquiring broad qualifications and an attitude of openness; and third, that a rich and diversified culture is the key to economic success for

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individuals and Québec society as a whole. Similarly, a *New York Times* advertising supplement on AThe Power and Purpose of Diversity@, stated that Abusinesses that recognize diversity as a fundamental corporate goal are the inside track for long-term success.@ They can Ahire better workers, meet customer demands more effectively, attract investors, and ultimately beat the competition@ (2001: 69). Again, openness to diversity is presented in a positive light, not only as an attribute of cultural elites, but as a winning strategy in the knowledge-based society.

While scientific research generally shuns normative issues, sociological research on tastes also supports the positive connotations associated with openness to diversity by showing that broad tastes constitute a source of social power. As argued by Erickson (1996), broad tastes serve not only as a means of distinction and thus of exclusion, but also as a means of inclusion in broad social networks. Wide networks, in turn, provide access to diversified sources of information which increase people=s ability to act strategically in their personal and professional lives (Granovetter 1995). In a world of segmented social circles and anonymous relationships, knowledge of a diversity of cultural codes appropriate in various social milieus, coupled with the ability to culture-switch according to circumstances, have become much more useful socially than knowledge of a restricted range of high culture symbols. Eclectic *tastes* signal membership in exclusive elite circles while broad *cultural resources* facilitate interaction in widely-different social situations.

In the field of politics, recent debates around cosmopolitanism (Hollinger 2001) reproduce the same cultural schema. Over and above its many definitions, cosmopolitanism generally refers to a new transnational ideal of openness, tolerance, mutual respect, and dialogue between cultures. It has been described as Athe new master concept@ for understanding how

globalization affects Apolitics, identity, and society@ (Beck 2001:87). Like the new conception

of tastes, it opposes openness and diversity to closure and unitariness. In his work on postethnic

identity, for example, David Hollinger (1995) contrasts two types of multiculturalism.

Cosmopolitan multiculturalism, he argues, is based on the idea that cultural identities are open,

fluid, and elective. Cosmopolitans have multiple and hybrid affiliations which are constantly

shifting according to circumstances. Pluralistic multiculturalism, by contrast, is based on the idea

that ethnic groups form stable and permanent collectivities whose collective rights need to be

protected and maintained over time. Hollinger argues that cosmopolitanism is preferable to

pluralism since it leads to greater social integration and reduces the likelihood of ethnic conflict.

Cosmopolitanism exemplifies an attitude of openness, eclecticism, and fluidity, while pluralism

is associated with what is unitary, rigid, and closed.

Finally, the rhetoric of on openness to diversity also finds its way in education, as

illustrated by the philosophy of the highly popular International Baccalaureate (IB) Organization,

which operates primary and secondary schools in many countries. Openness to cultural diversity

is a key axis of its educational project:

> AStrong emphasis is placed on the ideals of international understanding and responsible
> citizenship, to the end that IB students may become critical and compassionate thinkers,
> lifelong learners and informed participants in local and world affairs, conscious of the
> shared humanity that binds all people together *while respecting the variety of cultures
> and attitudes that makes for the richness of life@* (International Baccalaureate
> Organization 2002, emphasis added).

The evidence presented here is arguably anecdotal, but taken together, these examples

show a remarkably similar pattern. Invariably, terms such as diversity, openness, eclecticism, and

cosmopolitanism are associated with what is dominant and desirable, and opposed to what is

defined as unitary, closed upon itself, dominated, and undesirable. These oppositions, we argue,

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constitute the basis of a new discursive configuration. They are rhetorical devices used for classifying and evaluating people, things, and practices, in ways which are very similar across different social situations.

In a globalized world, there is no question that broad cultural repertoires and attitudes of openness are desirable, as a personal moral stance, as a source of status and power for individuals, and as a source of peace and tolerance in global politics. What is problematic from the point of view of social scientists, however, is that while openness to diversity is widely recognized as desirable, the capacity to acquire and express this attitude is not equally distributed among all social groupings. In the next two sections, we argue that in the context of unequal social relations, openness to diversity becomes an ideological tool which often, but not always, reflects and furthers the interests of groups in positions of power.

3a. Third conjecture: Openness to diversity reflects the cultural resources of privileged groups

How to distinguish oneself when no clear distinction can be drawn between caviar and peanut butter, between Bach=s cello and Eminem=s rap, or between Andromaque and Mickey Mouse? Conspicuous openness to diversity, we argue, presents a solution to this postmodern problem of distinction. Valuing what is diverse, eclectic, and exotic as opposed to what is limited, unitary, and banal reintroduces some measure of scarcity, and thus of closure, among the infinite choices available under postmodern conditions. Displaying tastes for cultural elements belonging to very diverse and foreign cultural domains presupposes broad knowledge of the arts and culture. Liking caviar as much as peanut butter, baroque cello as much as rap music, and Andromaque as much as Mickey Mouse assumes that one has had the opportunity to taste caviar,

to read Andromaque, to listen to Bach=s cello and to have passing knowledge of important figures in rap music. As argued by Donnat, the display of eclectic tastes, which is the foundation of elite attitudes, Arequires the combination of many assets in terms of cultural capital, personal availability, and proximity to the cultural events@ (Donnat 1994:343, our translation).

Donnat=s (1994) distinction between cognitive (what people know) and normative (what people like) aspects of cultural practices remains very useful here. In an extensive study of tastes and culture in France, Donnat examines the relationship between these two dimensions of culture. He shows that people who cumulate advantages in terms of education, income, age, and place of residence tend to have broader informational and cultural *repertoires*, in the sense that they have broader knowledge of the arts and culture. Since people overwhelmingly say that they *like* what they *know*, we may conclude that openness to diversity among high-status respondents is not only a question of *attitude*, but also a question of *resources*. The degree to which people=s tastes are open or closed, especially when openness is measured as the number of genres that people say they like in survey research, does not necessarily reflect attitudes of tolerance or intolerance, as argued by Bryson (1996). To the extent that tastes reflect people=s strategies for defining themselves in relation to others, the strategies they adopt partly reflect the quantity and quality of resources available to them by virtue of their positions in social structures. Given the current fluidity of cultural boundaries and hierarchies, conspicuous openness to diversity comes most naturally, or is more easily available, to those who possess broad cultural resources. Conspicuous openness to diversity and broad cultural resources thus function as cultural capital, in the bourdieusian sense of being widely considered as socially desirable but unequally distributed. The demise of high culture as the hallmark of bourgeois status does not mean the end

of culture-based domination. Because they are more difficult to acquire, exotic cultural objects and broad tastes continue to function as means of distinction.

Does possession of the multicultural capital (Bryson 1996) described here provide advantages in social interaction? While no empirical study has yet focussed on whether and how multicultural capital affects status and power relations, several studies indicate that the traditional type of cultural capital, usually operationalised as knowledge of, or taste for, highbrow culture, continues to anchor the upper end of taste-based status distinction (Peterson and Simkus 1992) and to function as a means of exclusion in specific social settings. For example, in a recent study of admissions at elite colleges in the United States, Soares (2002) shows that preference for highbrow arts among two cohorts who graduated from an Ivy League college in the 1960s is a strong predictor of whether or not their children gain admission in the most prestigious colleges. His research shows that it is primarily through the interviews conducted as part of the admissions process that prospective students have an opportunity to display to their advantage the cultural capital acquired in their family. Similarly, In a recent study of cultural capital and educational attainment in England, Sullivan (2001) shows that cultural capital is unequally distributed among social classes, that it is transmitted by upper class parents to their children, and that it has an effect on school performance. These studies indicate that traditional cultural capital remains, in specific circumstances, a prime vehicle for translating class inequalities into differential academic rewards. While ostensibly based on individual achievement and thus on merit, the admissions process systematically rewards students whose background includes large amounts of cultural capital. Whether conspicuous openness to diversity will eventually replace traditional cultural capital as a means of transmitting advantages between generations is an issue which

needs to be further investigated. If broad cultural resources do indeed constitute a new type of cultural capital, as argued above, they should provide advantages in social interaction.

3b. Third conjecture: The rhetoric of openness to diversity sustains unequal relations in global politics

There are interesting similarities between the rhetoric of openness to diversity in the field of tastes and debates over cosmopolitanism in the field of politics. In both cases, debates rest on a symbolic accentuation of the difference between openness and closure, diversity and unitariness (see De Sousa Santos (1997) for a similar argument about the distinction between local and global in debates over globalization). In this case, however, disagreements do not involve groups seeking to impose competing principles of evaluation or different valued characteristics. Rather, debates centre on which type of cosmopolitanism is most conducive to global peace and on whose practices best embody these attitudes of openness. In his critique of Hollinger=s concept of postethnic identity, for example, Will Kymlicka (1998) agrees about the benefits of open and fluid identities. However, he argues that when it is transposed in the international arena, Hollinger=s position often favours powerful groups, who use these arguments to discredit the claims of national minorities and to justify the destruction of their political and cultural institutions. Unlike cultural minorities resulting from immigration, national minorities found for example in Québec and Eastern Europe were incorporated into nation states as a result of military conflict, and they still define themselves as nations. Kymlicka points out that existing nation states, including the American society described by Hollinger, take for granted their own right to existence. The cosmopolitan multiculturalism advocated by Hollinger

is acceptable *within* the stable and permanent boundaries of the nation state, and within a very specific and strong national project based on the image of the melting pot. National minorities and small societies (Thériault 2002), whose culture doesn=t have the Anatural@ force of attraction of dominant societies, generally need to define their own national project in a defensive way.

Taking Québec society as an example, Kymlicka argues that cosmopolitan attitudes and openness to diversity are prevalent among individuals in their day-to-day interaction, but that these attitudes are articulated within the broader framework of a national project. The absence of protective measures would mean the disappearance or marginalisation of a modern and vibrant French culture in North America, much in the way that French barely survives as a minority folk culture in Louisiana. Cosmopolitanism and pluralism are thus not mutually exclusive models of social integration, but models which apply at different levels of analysisBbetween nations and within them. If we fail to acknowledge this, we gloss over the power struggles involved in the debate and we adopt the perspective of dominant groups: minority nationalism is associated with closure and rigidity while the cosmopolitan attitude of the dominant group is defined as open, and therefore as more legitimate.

In debates over cosmopolitanism, competing groups attempt to *define their own* cultural production and attitudes as global, eclectic, and open while defining the culture of disadvantaged groups with whom they are in conflict as local, regressive, and closed. Similar to the field of tastes, openness to diversity may become, in situations where relations between groups are highly unequal, an ideological tool conferring advantages to those in positions of power. This is also true in many other fields. In matters of business, those in positions of power are often more

likely to favour *open* markets, as exemplified by current debates about whether or not to impose restrictions on the global circulation of cultural goods (GCSCE 1999). With regard to bilingual education, some researchers argue that early training in a second language has additive effects when the first language is strongly established and supported by cultural institutions, but substractive effects in less favourable contexts, leading either to the disappearance of the first language or to imperfect knowledge of both (Thériault 1998). In situations of unequal power, openness to diversity is not necessarily a source of cultural enrichment and it may not be equally desirable for all parties involved. In a world where social relations are increasingly described in terms of fluid identities and loose social networks, the distinctions between open and closed as well as between diverse and unitary provide new means of classifying and evaluating people and things in a way which continues to reflect unequal power relations while ostensibly bypassing the old hierarchies of class cultures (highbrow vs lowbrow) and civilizations (Western universalism vs Non-Western particularism).

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