

Anarchism and Bourdieu's Critique of Social Distinction

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June 21, 2016

A Major Paper submitted to the Faculty of Environmental Studies in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master in Environmental Studies.

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Abstract

This paper attempts to put Pierre Bourdieu's theories of social distinction into dialogue with the revolutionary theory of anarchism. After outlining Bourdieu's theoretical and analytical background, I will discuss the major arguments and terminology of his groundbreaking 1979 work, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*. Special emphasis will be placed on the text's analysis of political inequality—particularly the ways in which revolutionary, leftist stances towards social domination can still embody a hierarchical logic of distinction. Bourdieu's focus on the subconscious, relational nature of social domination can enrich anarchists' own understandings of existing hierarchies, and illuminate the ways in which anarchist theory can produce forms of political distinction directly at odds with anarchism's revolutionary mission.

If anarchist theory is always in danger of betraying its goal of full political and social equality for all, anarchistic social cooperation provides an ideal political context in which historically dominated individuals can transcend the logic of distinction. In a case study of New York's Direct Action Network (1999-2002), I will consider the ways in which a prefigurative, anarchist approach to political action both challenges, and is challenged, by Bourdieu's logic of distinction.

Foreword

This Major Paper addresses the three distinct but interrelated components of my Plan of Study (POS): Practices of Radical Pedagogy, The Aesthetics of Conscientização and Mapping Hegemony. The first two components, taken together, form a larger revolutionary project for social change. By elucidating Bourdieu's conception of social distinction in my paper, I consider how this revolutionary project may be compromised by a social logic of hierarchical distinctions. As well, Bourdieu's trenchant critique of class tastes and aesthetic judgements has enriched my understanding of the ideological environment of contemporary consumer capitalism, thereby mapping hegemony. This paper also describes anarchistic social relationships, which are both pedagogical and aesthetic in nature. In a third chapter case study, I suggest that the prefiguration of radically new, creative forms of social life are both artistic and educational in nature.

Acknowledgements

I would first like to thank my supervisor, Stefan Kipfer, for his invaluable guidance during the writing of this paper. His detailed feedback on my drafts improved and enriched my work beyond what I thought possible. Professor J.J. McMurtry showed generosity in discussing with me prefiguration and anarchist politics—both inside the classroom and out.

My partner, Judith Muster, offered incredible support and assistance in every step of the process. Without her, I could never have done what I have done.

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Introduction

I am an anarchist. Over many years as an activist and intellectual, I have been puzzled and dismayed by anarchism's uneasy relationship to its own political culture. In circles that purportedly revere the individual alongside the collective, I have discovered a remarkable intolerance for "mainstream" tastes and cultural identifiers. In conversations that stridently affirm egalitarian revolution, I often detect a reflexive contempt for the opinions and politics that fall outside of a narrow spectrum of acceptable leftist opinion. While I never believed this disjuncture between theory and practice to be deliberately hypocritical, it raised important questions about the implicit assumptions structuring social and political behaviour. What would blind political actors to the elitism of their supposedly egalitarian political practice? How much does the theory of anarchism itself engender this elitism? How can anarchists be made aware of this weakness and what can be done about it?

The necessary inconclusiveness of the anarchist project—its commitment to honouring the uniqueness and creativity of specific communities seeking social justice—means that a definitive answer to these questions is impossible. However, as I began to familiarize myself with Pierre Bourdieu's influential critique of social distinction, I found his work to be an invaluable guide to navigating the complexities of political elitism. In *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, he investigates the underlying social and cultural logic that reproduces arbitrary inequalities, and shows this logic to act independently of stated political aims. Learning the political lessons of *Distinction*, however, demands that political actors recognize the social contexts in which revolutionary discourses and sensibilities still reproduce hierarchy.

It is such revolutionary discourses that lie at the heart of anarchist philosophy. While anarchism encompasses manifold issues, at its core there is a concern with revolutionizing arbitrary socio-political hierarchies. The decentralized, highly cooperative forms of democratic social life espoused by innumerable anarchist thinkers would empower all political actors to define their relationships to one other, regardless of class, race, gender and other differences. The Western anarchist tradition, strongly influenced by thinkers such as Mikhail Bakunin and Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, recognized the inherent problem of entrusting egalitarianism to a specific class or intellectually distinctive social group. In my view, the most promising anarchist response to this problem is prefiguration: the construction and enacting of social equality in whatever present political circumstance one finds oneself. This tactic draws attention to the political and ethical relationship between revolutionary ends and revolutionary means, as well as to the discrepancy between an unjust present and a just future.

I am convinced that Bourdieu's powerful critique of social domination can greatly clarify the relationship between anarchism as a political and cultural stance, and the anarchist project of revolutionizing existing social hierarchies. This clarity, I will argue, can improve the anarchist movements' understanding of their own revolutionary practices, and lead to a newfound commitment to the complex process of fostering social equality. Additionally, I will argue that the anarchist practice of prefiguration constitutes an antidote to the problem of distinction that Bourdieu identifies—but only insofar as revolutionary practice embodies a commitment to confronting the material and historical experiences of inequality that underpin all political stances. This carefully constituted

practice of anarchistic cooperation produces precisely the political circumstances in which this confrontation can occur democratically.

My discussion creates a dialogue between Bourdieu and anarchism by looking at the overlapping interests of both schools of thought. While my treatment of Bourdieu's critique of social hierarchies is focused on *Distinction*, I also make use of *Reproduction* (co-written by Jean Claude Passeron), as well as *Homo Academicus*. The former work outlines the key conception of symbolic violence while the latter provides a historical example of revolutionary elitism through an analysis of the May '68 protests in France. My discussion of Bourdieu's later writings will focus on *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* (co-written with Loïc Wacquant) and *Acts of Resistance*. These two works provide only a glimpse at the theorist's increasingly activist response to the onslaught of neoliberalism in the 80's and 90's, but they exemplify precisely the troubling blindness to elitism that Bourdieu himself earlier decried. The purpose is not to exhaustively consider how Bourdieu fails to address the logic of distinction, but to highlight the ways in which his response is inadequate. At the same time, this discussion of *Reflexive Sociology* and *Acts* will help to clarify how Bourdieu's politics differ from anarchism. Throughout my treatment of Bourdieu, I leaned heavily on contemporary theorist Michael Burawoy's *Conversations with Bourdieu*, which provided a crucial analytical bridge between Bourdieu's critical sociology and radical leftism (specifically that of Marx and Antonio Gramsci). Likewise, the work of Jeremy Lane was invaluable in contextualizing Bourdieu, both intellectually and historically. Lane's *Critical Introduction and Bourdieu's Politics* helped to outline the many unresolved political tensions in the French thinker's work.

To articulate a coherent vision of anarchist theory and practice, I have drawn from a wide variety of authors and time periods. The classic writings of Mikhail Bakunin and Pierre-Joseph Proudhon testify to anarchism's longstanding sensitivity to the relationship between revolutionary theories and social revolution itself. Certain aspects of their approach, however, are outdated: the contemporary fragmenting of formerly stable political categories of domination calls for a more flexible analytical framework. I therefore incorporate the work of theorists Nathan Jun, Benjamin Franks, Todd May and David Graeber (among others) to conceive of a framework that can address the complex political identities and heterogeneity of contemporary political life. May, in particular, greatly informs my conception of the difficulties involved in prefiguration. Several of his works engage in a dialogue with the thought of Jacques Rancière, detailing the challenge of honouring real difference in political practice.

My aforementioned reading of Graeber led me to the prefigurative practices of New York's Direct Action Network (DAN-NYC), active from the late 90s to the early 2000s. The history of this movement dramatizes the importance of specific political and cultural identities (and historical experiences) in informing the prefigurative process. I therefore draw on three accounts of this movement, all written from an ethnographic or sociological perspective.

My argument begins in Chapter One with a brief history of Bourdieu's intellectual and political trajectory. I will then introduce *Distinction's* conceptual analysis of social domination, as well as the sociological terminology Bourdieu adopts in his writing. As we shall see, his reliance on scientific methodology both helps and hinders his critique of

social domination. I conclude the chapter by discussing Bourdieu's own flawed response to the political problems he has identified.

Chapter Two first details anarchism's critique of revolutionary elitism, before connecting this to Bourdieu's discussion of political distinction. I then describe anarchism's political response to the problems identified in *Distinction*: namely, an ethical theory of action known as prefiguration, which dissolves any hard-and-fast distinction between revolutionary ends and revolutionary means. After identifying some of the conceptual drawbacks of prefiguration, I will end by reaffirming its significance for anarchist practice and the profound pedagogical opportunities it affords.

In Chapter Three I will attempt to illustrate the concepts of political distinction and anarchism discussed so far using a case study: namely, the direct action culture of DAN-NYC. After outlining the history of the network, I will discuss its practice of prefigurative anarchism. If DAN-NYC was only partially successful in revolutionizing the hierarchical social relationships identified by Bourdieu, the genealogical critique enabled by its democratic decision-making processes affirms the political promise of anarchism.

Chapter One: The Logic of Social Distinction

Introduction

In his landmark 1979 study, *Distinction*, Bourdieu argues that social hierarchies are not enforced and reproduced according to an explicit set of rules and commands. Instead, the social dominance of elites is embodied within the logic of distinction, which orders and differentiates a society's unequal experiences of culture. More troubling still, this logic often operates at a subconscious level, and causes social agents to espouse opinions and values that are quite independent of—even antithetical to—their true social intentions. (As Bourdieu puts it, “what people do, they do as if they are not doing it”; 2010, 199). The political consequences of this analysis are troubling, to say the least: a person's explicit affirmation of democratic equality or cultural difference might serve only to reproduce existing hierarchical relationships. For example, espousing a preference for “progressive” newspapers might seem to imply a “progressive” stance towards culture in general; Bourdieu, however, finds that such tastes distinguish social agents in relation to other groups, according to a “system of perceived differences whose objective truth is misrecognized” as natural (ibid., 168; 68-69; 233-236). Thus, even where the content of cultural artifacts seems to challenge the status quo, it reaffirms the cultural supremacy of some over others within a hierarchical system of social classification (ibid., 238, 226).

Bourdieu's Intellectual Background

Pierre Bourdieu was born August 1, 1930 in a peasant community of the Béarn, a region of Southwestern France that borders with Spain and the Pyrenees (Lane 2000, 9). Distinguishing himself as a bright and promising student, he was allowed to study for an *agrégation* in philosophy at the École normale supérieure in Paris—one of the most prestigious academic qualifications in the country (ibid.; Susen and Turner, xviii). His 1955 conscription into the French army took him to Algeria to fight in the War of Independence, and his experiences of the conflict would have a massive and lasting impact on his political thinking.

Above all, he discovered his own complicity in a system of social domination. “The war,” in his words, “plainly revealed the true basis for the colonial order: the relation, backed by force, which allows the dominant caste to keep the dominated caste in a position of inferiority” (quoted in Burawoy 2012c, 4). Importantly, he recognized that the dominated caste did not experience their subjugation solely in terms of economic exploitation or physical harm; colonialism entailed a further, symbolic humiliation, the creation “of a ‘contemptible’ person at the same time that it creates [a] contemptuous attitude” (ibid.).

Bourdieu was also “appalled...by the gap between the views of the French intellectuals about this war...and [his] own experiences” (quoted in Goodman 2009, 106). While celebrated figures such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Frantz Fanon celebrated the “utopian” struggles of Algeria’s supposedly radicalized peasants, Bourdieu found only suffering and despair. In his words, “the ‘Algerian peasantry’ was overwhelmed by the

war, by the concentration camps, and by the mass deportations. To claim that it was a revolutionary peasantry was completely idiotic” (Bourdieu, quoted in *ibid*; Lane 2000, 10-12). This suspicion of revolutionary utopianism—an intellectual refusal to account for the actual material conditions of domination—would figure greatly in *Distinction*, particularly that book’s scornful analysis of French political parties and leaders (Burawoy 2012c, 1-2; Ahluwalia 2010, 139-140).¹

It would also catalyze Bourdieu’s own definitive conversion from philosophy to the discipline of sociology. As he explained in a much later interview, “I could not be content with reading left-wing newspapers or signing petitions. I had to do something concrete, as a scientist” (Bourdieu, quoted in Lane 2000, 10). His first major writings on Algeria, 1958’s *Sociologie d’Algérie*, perfectly reflect this empirical turn, and purports to “reconstruct the social and economic structures” of the country’s subjugated indigenous cultures (*ibid.* 12). As a “sober and objective observ[er]”, the author would cultivate “disinterest and impartiality” — an analytic stance perfectly in keeping with pioneering sociologists such as Emile Durkheim and Max Weber, both of whom profoundly influenced Bourdieu’s conception of social domination.

Weber, in particular, inspired in the French thinker a long-lasting antipathy for Marxism and Marxist analysis. In a late interview with Franz Schultheis and Andreas Pfeuffer, Bourdieu suggested that *The Protestant Ethic* had corrected for him

a picture which Marxism had painted in a somewhat reductive fashion. In essence,

Weber is concerned with retrieving the symbolic dimension of social life—not as the

¹ In later works, such as *Le déracinement* and *Travail et travailleurs en Algérie*, Bourdieu would prove just as skeptical of Algeria’s post-revolutionary government, and the state military’s political consolidation around an ideology of an “authoritarian socialism” (Cf. Lane 2000, 27-33; Fowler 2011, 40-42). Notwithstanding his remarks to James Le Sueur that the Fanon’s revolutionary writings on Algeria are

primary and ultimate dimension, but as a dimension which deserves its legitimate place in history. (2011, 115-116)

Weber's emphasis on interrogating symbolic relationships by means of sociological analysis is a starting point for Bourdieu's own concern with the psychic, subconscious humiliations of colonialism; Weber also anticipates *Distinction's* emphasis on embodied and relational social values. Likewise, his influential essay, "Class, Status and Party," argues that social "status goes hand in hand with a monopolization of ideal and material goods or opportunities," and is signified above all by "distance and exclusiveness" (Weber 1991, 190-191; cf. *ibid.*, Lane 2000, 188).² This too will later figure in Bourdieu's conception of cultural stratification.

Bourdieu returned to France and the Parisian academic world in 1960, first as an assistant to Raymond Aron at the Sorbonne³ and, after 1964, as director of the *École pratique des hautes études en science sociale* (Grenfell 2004, 7). Several commentators, including Jeremy Lane and Michael Burawoy, note an increasing apathy in Bourdieu's attitudes towards leftist revolution during this period, as the battles in Algeria receded into memory (Burawoy 2012c, 2; Lane 2000, 9-33). Lane charts this change in Bourdieu's repeated revisions to *Sociologie d'Algérie*. The second edition, which appeared in 1962, demanded that colonialism be "radically destroyed, that is from top to

² For our purposes, Durkheim's most important influence on Bourdieu's thought is his dubious assertion in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* that "everywhere culture is constructed against nature, that is, through effort, exercise, suffering" (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 87; cf. Durkheim 1995, 320-321). As we shall, Bourdieu will later defend "reflexive" scientific study on the grounds that it is "accessible only on condition of mastering the relatively cumulative history of previous...production, that is, the endless series of refusals and transcendences necessary to reach the present" (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 87).. cf. Bourdieu 1996, xix.

³ It is worth noting, in passing, Aron's influence on Bourdieu's critique of Marxist intellectuals and party politics, to whom Bourdieu dedicated 1962's *The Algerians*. Aron's *Opium of the Intellectuals*, in Bourdieu's own words, "turned the Marxist slogan about religion as 'the opiate of the masses' against intellectuals dedicated to the Marxist religion of the 'people', and against their claim to the status of awakeners of minds" (1992, 223). Cf. Bourdieu et. al. 2011, 114.

bottom”, so that Algerian society might realize its “own destiny in complete freedom and full responsibility” (quoted in Lane 2000, 18). A later edition, however, warns the Algerian peasantry to resist “national populism” propagated by the “new bourgeoisie of the great State bureaucracies” in order to retain political control of the country (ibid.).

These revisions exemplify the changing political priorities of Bourdieu’s analysis. Where before he was willing to advocate for direct action in response to social domination, his 1960s re-integration into French political and intellectual life saw him reject that earlier stance, in favour of a more politically cautious approach. In the two decades preceding the writing of *Distinction*, he became increasingly skeptical of leftist politics, and their ability to carry out revolution.⁴

Distinction and Social Hierarchy

In the opening pages of his seminal 1979 study, Bourdieu suggests that distinction can be understood as a “relationship between social groups maintaining different, and even antagonistic, relationships to culture” (2010, 4). Crucially, these “differences” and “antagonisms” do not play out among social equals, but between the dominant and dominated factions of a profoundly hierarchical society. Bourdieu suggests that dominance is not signified solely by means of economic power, but also through an array of social, cultural and symbolic indicators. Cultural capital, for instance, exists almost

⁴ This more distanced approach is perhaps best exemplified by *Reproduction*, co-written in 1970 with Jean-Claude Passeron. In defending the scientific objectivity of their analysis—and out of a fear that they may be viewed as anything other than impartial sociological researchers—the authors go to absurd lengths to disavow the ethical urgency of overcoming social domination, and preface their study with a warning against any “moralizing reading” of symbolic violence (1990, xix-xx, x).

solely in an embodied state, and manifests itself as a certain level of mastery of those discourses, gestures, dispositions and tastes that are universally understood as legitimate (ibid. 258-264, 283-284). Unlike economic assets, cultural forms of capital cannot be traded like a commodity and must be “affirmed and reaffirmed” in the course of social interactions as “a weapon and a stake in the struggles which go on in the fields of cultural production” (1986, 46, 48).

Social capital, meanwhile, consists of the relationships and contacts that individuals can realistically exploit to advance and maintain their own position within the hierarchy—what Bourdieu characterizes as “membership in a group” (1986, 51). In this case, distinction is partially embodied (in the material form of personal relationships) but also “socially instituted,” which means it is guaranteed by privileged access or association with existing institutions (and expressed, for instance, by inclusion within a prestigious family, corporation or school; 1986; 51). Social capital, it should be added, plays a vital role in defining what is and what is not culturally legitimate, since elites can routinely exercise their exclusive access to the whole critical apparatus “mandated with producing legitimate classifications” (Bourdieu 2010, 20).

By acquiring enough social and cultural assets, social actors can attain a third form of capital, symbolic capital, which Bourdieu defines as “the acquisition of a reputation for competence and an image of respectability and honourability” (ibid. 285; cf. Joas and Knöbl 2011, 18). In many ways, this final form of capital is the hardest to obtain, since it depends on the consolidation of more concrete markers of distinction (class, occupation, fashion sense, artistic taste) into a general aura of cultural authority (the proverbial “leader of the community,” for example or French public notable; ibid., 289; cf. Bourdieu

1990, 112-121).

These various forms of capital, taken together with more traditional economic assets, are constituted in social space as a specific class “of elementary conditions of existence,” and each of us embodies a social position according to this rationale (2010, 108). For those at the very top of the pyramid—those with the most distinctive tastes and dispositions, who possess the most valuable objects and prestigious occupations—the obvious benefit of such a system is the “profit par excellence...the feeling of being what it is right to be” (ibid, 225). This superiority is also continually validated in the cultural arena: because elites control “the whole critical apparatus mandated with producing legitimate classifications,” the tastes and dispositions of other classes are, for the most part, represented as a negative (and inferior) point of comparison to their own supreme tastes (Bourdieu 2010, 24, 50).

As a result, the lowest classes—those who are most materially deprived and who can least afford to cultivate non-economic forms of capital—experience the “race for distinction” as a losing game, one in which, “objectively, they are beaten from the start” (ibid., 164). The psychic toll of this cultural position, so the argument goes, is evident in the dispositions of “incompetence, failure or cultural unworthiness” that these lower classes embody (ibid., 387). Even when the culture of dominated groups represents itself in popular culture, Bourdieu suggests it does so in reaction to dominant culture: “The popular imagination can only invert the relationship which is the basis of the aesthetic sociodicy, [turning] head over heels all the ‘values’ in which the dominant groups project and recognize their sublimity” (ibid., 493).

Those in the middle classes, meanwhile, are the “most ambiguously located in the

social structure” (ibid., 106), and therefore experience varying degrees of alienation from both polarities of class consciousness. On the one hand, they are forever acutely aware of the chronic shortages of capital that exclude them from the cultural aristocracy (whose games of distinction demand a great deal of energy, self-sacrifice and training; ibid. 80-81). On the other hand, they are repelled from the discredited working-class culture by the logic of distinction—but also, by the same token, cut adrift from its supportive systems of social reproduction (ibid., 372). However successful their strategies of capitalization, whatever social rank they ultimately obtain, the various factions of the bourgeois and petit-bourgeois (as Bourdieu defines them) struggle continually with a gnawing, existential inauthenticity—the constant substitution of “seeming for being”—which grows out of their relative deficit of capital (and hence, cultural legitimacy; ibid., 485, 205).

Regardless of how many different “classes of conditions of existence” there might be, or how definitively these classes characterize individual experience, it is safe to say that the basic logic of distinction, as understood by Bourdieu, reaffirms social hierarchy and the cultural domination of some by others. The vast majority of society does not get to decide the criteria by which tastes are judged, or which jobs will be imbued with how much social capital. For the logic of distinction to function as it does, all social actors must, in Bourdieu’s words, “run in the same direction”—that is, towards the set of prestigious occupations, tastes, cultural objects, mannerisms and so on defined by the dominant classes (ibid., 159).

Inevitably, the race for distinction translates into a win for elitism and aristocratic interests and a demoralizing loss for everyone else. Efforts by the lower and middle

classes to catch up to their betters are consistently counterbalanced by upper class efforts to maintain distinction (ibid., 157). This is not simply because members of the dominant classes can draw upon invaluable forms of social capital (distinguished families, good schooling, “friends in high places,” etc.) that other classes do not have. The more serious problem is that in order to play “the game of culture,” as Bourdieu calls it, one must already have “a certain distance from economic necessity” (ibid., 47). Learning the “right” facts and embodying the “right” aesthetic dispositions is not something achieved overnight, and in fact requires enormous amounts of time, energy and educational training—resources that dominated members of society do not possess. When these necessary preconditions for distinction are taken into account, according to Bourdieu, the pursuit of social and cultural capital can be seen for what it really is,

the form of class struggle which the dominated classes allow to be imposed on them when they accept the stakes offered by the dominant classes. It is an integrative struggle...in which they are beaten before they start, as the constancy of the gaps testifies, [but in which they] implicitly recognize the legitimacy of the goals pursued by those whom they pursue, by the mere fact of taking part. (ibid., 164)

At this point, it is worth asking how exactly Bourdieu’s conception of class struggle deviates from Marxist approaches: if the cultural supremacy of elites is directly related to existing economic disparities, then isn’t the game of distinction simply a manifestation of late consumer capitalism? Why bother to differentiate between social, symbolic or cultural dimensions of existing hierarchies, if, as Bourdieu himself concedes, they are all rooted in economic inequality (1986, 53-55)?

In *Conversations with Bourdieu*, Burawoy suggests that the French sociologist transcends Marxist analysis by recognizing that symbolic, social and cultural distinctions “engender their own domination effects” (2012a, 1; cf. Bourdieu and Passeron 1990, xv). That is to say, distinction does not simply mirror the real inequality of economic exploitation, but enacts a symbolic violence all its own—an “imposition of a cultural arbitrary by an arbitrary power” (Bourdieu, quoted in Lane 2000, 67; Bourdieu and Passeron 1990, 6-7). Dominated social groups “misrecognize” the objective basis of cultural and social capital in economic wealth, and so instill distinguished individuals with “the illusion of election on grounds of personal uniqueness” (2010, 158). This results in a worldview that mystifies “the structure of the relation of domination” into something natural and uncontroversial (Bourdieu, quoted in Burawoy 2012a, 7). What Bourdieu’s analysis allows us to clearly grasp is the importance of symbolic violence to the continuation of hierarchy: dominated classes accept their masters’ rule precisely because the social logic of distinction naturalizes what is, in fact, an arbitrary social inequality.

Admittedly, Marx and Engels suggest something similar in *The German Ideology*, in arguing that “the class which has the means of material production at its disposal has control...over the means of mental production,” and that control of mental production ensures the subjection of those who lack such means (quoted in *ibid.*). The problem, as Burawoy suggests, is that they never go beyond this basic formulation to articulate what this subjection actually looks like, or how it operates (*ibid.*). Part of what makes *Distinction* so relevant to contemporary debates about social domination is its vivid and careful explication of those ideological mechanisms that allow elites to retain political

and economic control.

Habitus, Field and Doxa: Contested Terminology

Unfortunately, the sociological training that imbued Bourdieu's analysis with rigor and clarity also inspired a zeal for new classificatory schemes and analytical categories—few of which, I would argue, enhance our understanding of social domination. *Distinction*, for instance, places great emphasis on his famous conception of habitus,

a structuring structure, which organizes practices and the perception of practices, but also a structured structure: the principle of division into logical classes which organizes the perception of the social world [and] is itself the product of internalization of the division into social classes. (2010, 166)

Clearly, Bourdieu wishes to emphasize the near-ontological role of class divisions in narrowing social reality. A class habitus is not something that any social agent is free to adopt or reject. Much of the time, it “functions below the level of consciousness and language, beyond the reach of introspective scrutiny or control by the will” (ibid., 468), and in times of relative ideological stability, consolidates further into an experience of doxa—that is, “an adherence to relations of order which, because they structure inseparably both the real world and the thought world, are accepted as self-evident” (ibid., 473).

At the same time, Bourdieu insists that the deeply entrenched dispositions structured by a class habitus “are not infallible” and “produce in the dominated classes a

discourse in contradiction with itself” (ibid., 468). Because elites exercise exclusive control over the logic of distinction, dominated classes experience a profound rupture between the “spontaneous discourse” resulting from everyday realities of material deprivation and the language of distinction they must utilize in the cultural sphere (ibid., 464).

The problem, as both Lane and Burawoy point out, is that Bourdieu never adequately explains how and in what circumstances a social agent might overcome the social logic inculcated through class experience and demonstrate the “fallibility” of their habitus (Burawoy 2012a, 6; cf. Ross 1991, xi-xix). The concept of habitus is therefore theoretically incoherent: it simultaneously asserts that the ideological programming produced by class existence makes domination feel intuitive, but also suggests that the dominated classes will feel alienated from their own experience. In certain passages of *Distinction*, social subjects possess a limited amount of agency, while others argue the exact opposite. In one section, titled “The Social Space and Its Transformations,” Bourdieu goes in both directions at once. The social trajectories of classed individuals are supposedly subject to “accidents”—encompassing anything from geopolitical wars to romantic encounters to chance meetings—that shift class subjects “from one trajectory to another” (2010, 104). These accidents, however, ultimately “depend statistically on the position and disposition of those whom they befall” (ibid.; Cf. 457, Turner 2011, 239-240). The message is unclear: are social actors wrong to experience their own class trajectory as a series of historical accidents? Do romantic encounters or chance meetings have any impact on someone’s actual social status? Bourdieu concludes that “position and individual trajectory are not statistically independent; all positions of arrival are not

equally probable for all starting points” but in fact directly related to “the system of factors constituting [a] class” (ibid). This could be read either as a defiance or confirmation of the power of habitus; we know too little about the relationship between an individual’s consciousness of social reality and the “structuring structures” that create that social reality.

Further conceptual problems arise from *Distinction*’s overreliance on the term “field,” which Bourdieu uses to describe spheres of social activity “governed by different logics and therefore inducing different forms of realization” (ibid, 95). Bourdieu almost certainly means to suggest that cultural or social capital will take vastly different forms in an educational as opposed to artistic or scientific context, expressed by the formula “[habitus) (capital)] + field = practice” (2010, 95). The problem, as Burawoy points out, is that Bourdieu never provides a definitive list of fields—nor does he explain how they interact with one another, or the ways in which different fields alter the value of social and cultural capital (Burawoy 2012a, 13, 11). Ultimately, Lane’s more expansive definition of field as a “structured space of relations, in which the positions of individuals...were defined in terms of their differential relationship with other participants in the field” is more coherent and useful (2000, 73; cf. Bourdieu 1969, 2010, 223).

Gramsci's Hegemony Versus Bourdieu's Habitus: A Comparison of Models

For our purposes, what is most important to note about Bourdieu's conception of class habitus is its profound sociological power in shaping individual conceptions of social domination. Consider Burawoy's comparison of habitus with Antonio Gramsci's conception of hegemony, a social condition he defined as a "combination of force and consent, which balance each other reciprocally, without force predominating excessively over consent" (quoted in Burawoy 2012b, 8). As Burawoy argues, habitus (and the forms of domination it embodies) is, for Bourdieu, too immersive a social construct to allow for the "good sense" of the dominated classes,

whereas Gramsci looks upon the practical activity of collectively transforming the world as the basis of good sense, and potentially leading to class consciousness, Bourdieu sees in practical activity the opposite—class unconsciousness and acceptance of the world as it is. (ibid., 9)⁵

As a result, the logic of distinction represents a far greater ideological obstacle to revolution than a Gramscian conception of hegemony. Social groups accept unequal positions within a shared cultural hierarchy, and distinction naturalizes the material basis for the dominance of some by others. The fact that distinction is expressed subconsciously *and* that our class habitus acclimatizes us so thoroughly to everyday experiences of symbolic violence suggest that hierarchy is a social logic we reproduce

⁵ In a 1985 essay, "Social Space and the Genesis of Groups," Bourdieu suggests that "perception of the social world" is a direct "product of the internalization...of the objective structures of social space. consequently, they incline agents to accept the social world as it is, to take it for granted, rather than rebel against it, to put forward opposed and even antagonistic possibilities" (Bourdieu, qtd. in Burawoy 2012b, 9-10).

without ever necessarily rationalizing it (ibid., 10-11). In Bourdieu's words, distinction "has no need to see itself for what it is," and those with the most cultural capital are typified by their seeming *lack* of interest in distinguishing themselves, since they can trust in "the objective mechanisms which provide their distinctive properties" to maintain their social and cultural capital (2010, 246).

Distinction and Revolutionary Political Stances

These arguments are directly relevant to revolutionary practices that attempt to redress existing hierarchies. If, Bourdieu, following Marx, is correct to suggest that domination is expressed "independently of individual consciousness and will," and that languages of domination "owe their specific efficacy to the fact that they function below the level of consciousness and language," then even radical expressions of dissent or arguments for political equality can reproduce the social logic of hierarchy (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 97; Bourdieu 2010, 468).

Bourdieu in fact devotes significant time and energy to exploring this sociological problem, and some of the most scathing criticism in *Distinction* is directed at the hypocrisy of intellectual and political radicals for failing to recognize "their own position and the perverse relation to the social world it forces on them" (2010, 474). These intellectuals are prominent Marxists like Jean-Paul Sartre, who demonstrate a theoretical mastery over the nature of social relationships and the dehumanizing nature of prevailing economic conditions, but refuse to recognize that this "subversive point of honour" positions their own views above those espoused by the bourgeois and working classes

(ibid, 474, 424).

The same holds true for the political realm more generally. In the sociological survey results that form the analytical backbone of *Distinction*, Bourdieu finds a striking “contrast between revolutionary dispositions manifest[ed] ... and the conservative dispositions betray[ed] in the order of ethics” (ibid., 424). Even when prominent Leftist movements, such as the *Parti Socialiste Unifié* (PSU) or *Parti Communiste Française* (PCF), periodically reaffirm a populist faith in “the common people,” or declare that “Workers of the World Must Unite!” these expressions of radical equality are undercut by the implicit supremacy of the party leadership, which defines the larger political and intellectual agenda and thus “consecrates the ‘concentration in a few individuals’ of the capacity to produce discourse about the social world” (ibid., 398). Insofar as these parties actually reproduce the existing social hierarchy, Bourdieu suggests that they are morally indistinguishable from social conservatives: both political stances are defined by competing factions of social elites, who implicitly cooperate in legitimizing their own opinions and dispositions as the very definition of political competence (ibid., 415, 400).

Bourdieu and The Events of May ‘68

It should be pointed out that Bourdieu’s extremely skeptical view of Leftist struggles did not form in a political vacuum. By the time he came to write *Distinction*, he had spent nearly twenty years working in the Parisian university system, and the upheavals he experienced left him increasingly disillusioned at the prospect of “a genuine inversion of values” by which the dominated classes might free themselves from the logic of distinction and regain the integrity of their ethos (Bourdieu 2010, 164, 464-465).

Perhaps most significant were the massive protests that broke out in May 1968, at the Université Paris Ouest Nanterre La Défense, and subsequently all across France.

In *Homo Academicus*, Bourdieu suggests that the May '68 protests had far less to do with revolutionary aspirations than with structural changes in the postwar French society. The “democratization of schooling” that accompanied France’s post-war economic boom saw new factions of the dominated classes enter the university system for the first time in pursuit of accreditation and, more broadly, a distinguished position in French society (1988, 162-164; *ibid.*, 127-139). What happened instead was a massive devaluation of university diplomas and “the structural de-skilling of a whole generation” (Bourdieu 2010, 140): job suppliers failed to provide this vast cohort with the expected social and economic capital, which meant that many new baccalaureat-holders became victims of downclassing and were forced to accept menial jobs, low in social and economic capital (*ibid.*; 1988, 164). Meanwhile, the country’s traditional elites defended their own cultural distinction and social reproduction by securing more exclusive forms of academic accreditation (2010, 140, 127-134).

The deepening chasm between student expectations and their objective conditions culminated in May '68, with the breakdown of the students’ class habitus:

The crisis...undo[es] that sense of placing, both as ‘knowing one’s place’ and as knowing how to place sound investments, which is inseparable from the sense of realities and possibilities which we call sensible. It is the critical moment when, breaking with the ordinary experience of time as simple reproduction of a past or of a future inscribed in the past, all things become possible (*at least apparently*). (emphasis mine; Bourdieu 1988, 182; Lane 2000, 82)

That final qualifier speaks volumes of Bourdieu's ambivalence towards these would-be revolutionaries. What was purportedly a movement explicitly concerned with redressing inequality and a "struggle against the capitalist system in its university institution" instead became an "an aristocratic revolt" against the existing hierarchy—that is, a struggle to redress the students' own thwarted social ambitions, but which left the basic logic of cultural hierarchy untouched (ibid., 186, 185-187). This sublimated social objective precluded any real redistribution of class roles or material resources, and ensured "a magical denial of the factors causing the malaise" (ibid., 186; cf. Lane 2000, 83).

In *Distinction*, Bourdieu suggests that the '68 protests represent more than just a failure of political imagination or a false expectation of social change. By refusing to acknowledge the extent to which the struggle of distinction had structured political demands, the striking students failed to understand

that social struggles are not all, or always, in contradiction with the perpetuation of the established order...that the 'frustrated expectations' which are created by the time-lag between the imposition of legitimate needs...and access to the means of satisfying them, do not necessarily threaten the survival of the system; that the structural gap and the corresponding frustrations...perpetuat[e] the structure of positions while transforming the 'nature' of conditions. (Bourdieu 2010, 161)

A Critique of Counterculture

In *Distinction*, Bourdieu offers a very similar critique of the “countercultural” movements emerging in France during the 60’s and early ‘70s.⁶ Even as this new cultural vanguard attempted an aesthetic subversion of traditional bourgeois notions of order and propriety—typified by “ostentatious poverty” and a studied casualness towards fashion and cultural tastes—they reaffirmed both the social logic of capital and the cultural game of distinction (ibid., 220, 248).⁷ Yet counterculture’s continuing influence on popular tastes and dispositions, despite purporting to reject the existing social order and fostering “a cult of revolution,” ultimately represents no more and no less than an attempt to “contest one culture in the name of another”—that is, to redefine capital in ways that advance their own bid for social legitimacy (ibid., 248, 152).

Although countercultural trends in French society failed to equalize the basic “structure of social positions,” Bourdieu is not suggesting that their impact was negligible. By connecting the iconography of cultural dissent to distinct patterns of conspicuous consumption, the counterculture engulfed France in an “explosion of

⁶ For an extensive discussion of the relationship between the ’68 protests and French counterculture, see Julian Bourg (2007), esp. 21-34 and Lane 2006, 8. In *Distinction*, Bourdieu concerns himself solely with French countercultural movements, and does not directly address the ’68 protests until 1988, with the publication of *Homo Academicus*. Nevertheless, the two works ascribe strikingly similar motivations and sensibilities to ’68 protestors and the counterculture: namely the disjunction between cultural aspirations bred of academic training and the few available opportunities to obtain social and economic capital, or “hysteresis”. Compare Bourdieu 2010, 106, 139-150 and 1988, 159-193.

⁷ Roughly contemporaneous with Bourdieu’s writing of *Distinction*, Dick Hebdige and Stuart Hall were exploring “the meaning of style” through a sociological study of subcultures in pre-Thatcherite Britain. See Hebdige (1979), Hall, et al. (2006). Hall follows Phil Cohen in arguing that subcultural forms of dissent constitute an “imaginary relation” to real conditions of class inequality (2006, 25-26, 35-40). Hebdige is slightly more sympathetic towards forms of “subcultural deviance”—but only slightly. Subcultural style, he argues, “does have its moment, its brief outrageous spectacle, and in our study of style in subculture we should focus on that moment, on the fact of transformation rather than on the objects-in-themselves” (1979, 130). Even Hebdige, however, contends that “no amount of stylistic incantation can alter the oppressive mode in which the commodities used in subculture have been produced” (ibid.).

consumerism” (ibid., 149, 89). This cultural shift reflected a larger transformation in the tactics used to instill social domination, away from policing and towards advertising, so that “the symbolic integration of dominated classes” is increasingly achieved “by imposing needs rather than inculcating norms” (ibid., 150, 149).-

More importantly, the ethos of individualism that accompanied these new, countercultural identities represents, for Bourdieu, a political disaster. Where the old class habitus “tended to produce clearly demarcated social identities,” the indeterminacy of counterculture “shifts agents from the terrain of social crisis and critique to the terrain of personal critique and crisis” (ibid., 152-153). It also increases their vulnerability to market forces, since the counterculture’s typical emphasis on personal distinction and a rebellion against cultural constraints sets the individual adrift from existing systems of social reproduction (ibid., 371-2).

If there is one lesson to draw from Bourdieu’s historical analysis, it is that aesthetic and symbolic representations of revolution should be taken with a grain of salt. Social domination does not depend on overt expressions of political repression or aristocratic values, and even when a class habitus breaks down, the logic of distinction can be embodied in revolutionary aspirations themselves. As Bourdieu later asserted during an interview with Loïc Wacquant, “to denounce hierarchy does not get us anywhere. What must be changed are the conditions that make this hierarchy exist, both in reality and in minds” (1992, 84).

The Political Problem of Countercultural Stances

The problem with countercultural stances is that they can actually make it harder to formulate a politics that addresses these conditions. When expressions of dissent are merely one more category within the logic of distinction, the basis for class inequality in fact becomes harder to recognize. Counterculture, as the French example illustrates, encourages the illusion that class conditions could be transcended by cultivating “vague and ill-defined” cultural stances towards social domination (Bourdieu 2010, 151). These new, “fuzzier” class identities, however, only impact the cultural terms by which distinction is expressed—not the symbolic violence underlying it (ibid, 151). The post-’68 emphasis on consumer-mediated expressions of dissent allows those who feel deprived of social and cultural capital to compete with the social aristocracy for distinction in ways that are misrecognized as legitimate challenges to the status quo (ibid, 88-89).

Yet Bourdieu suggests that any disjuncture “between [the] position really occupied and the political positions adopted” cannot be condemned as hypocrisy or revolutionary posturing (ibid., 456). The conditioning of the habitus allows political actors to “rightly believe...they serve their own interests” even when these are, in fact, “highly sublimated and euphemized interests,” whose political implications are concealed (ibid., 237). Such concealment and euphemization of capital interests is even more harmful than total alienation from politics. Rather than creating a stance in line with their own subjective experiences, political subjects channel a rightful opposition to hierarchy into forms of consumption and cultural posturing that reinforces the status quo.

Ultimately, then, Bourdieu is not so far from Gramsci's suggestion that, when conditioned by hegemony, "a theoretical consciousness...[is] historically in opposition to [its own] activity" (Burawoy 2012b, 9-10); he simply places far more stress on the difficulties involved in repairing this rupture—especially given the facility with which dominant classes control the conversion of theory into practice. In *Distinction*, social subjects "are perhaps never less likely to transcend the 'limits of their minds' than in the representation they have and give of their position, which defines those limits" (2010, 486).

Bourdieu's Defense of Reflexive Sociology

To break out of this ideological cul-de-sac, Bourdieu places his trust in the practice of "reflexive" sociology, which he believes offers "a small chance of knowing what game we play, and of minimizing the ways in which we are manipulated by the forces of the field in which we evolve" (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 198). While reflexive sociologists rely on the same scientific practices as their traditional counterparts ("experimental groping, statistical analysis, reading of scholarly papers," etc.; *ibid.*, 185), they avoid the Sartrean trap of naturalizing their own analytic viewpoint by conducting a genealogical analysis of "the history of the emergence of [the] problems" they study (*ibid.*, 238). This sociological "will to understand why and how one understands," Bourdieu claims, can rupture the doxa that normally "condemns [us] to be nothing more than the instrument of that which [we] claim to think" (*ibid.* 197; cf. 2010, 426).- Reflexivity, thus conceived, represents both an intellectual and a moral advance, since it

combines “a true knowledge of social laws” with “a self-understanding shorn of self-complacency,” and “open[s] up the possibility of identifying true sites of freedom” that transcend the existing logic of social domination (ibid. 197, 211, 198; cf. 2010, 434).

Naturally, in the present socio-economic context not everyone gets the chance to practice reflexive sociology, which immediately raises the question of how this “reasoned utopianism” is supposed to be disseminated to a broader public. Bourdieu resolutely rejects the Gramscian model of organic intellectual work, by which the knowledge of the working classes is elaborated through critical dialogue (Burawoy 2012b, 10; cf. Fowler 2011, 50). Instead, he follows Weber in suggesting that elite political and intellectual groups can, in fact, advance “universal values and interests”—provided they maintain “autonomy” from “heteronomous” influences such as the capitalist market or neoliberal state (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 183-184; Lane 2000, 182-183; Robbins 2011, 318-319).⁸ In autonomous academic fields such as reflexive sociology, scientific discipline coupled with an emphasis on genealogical critique and an intellectual “interest in disinterestedness” will supposedly lead researchers to recognize and redress the dominated classes’ “cultural dispossession” of universal values (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 83; Lane 2000, 183). In later works such as *Rules of Art* and *The State Nobility*, Bourdieu suggests that a similar autonomy is possible for artists and writers, given their tendency to strike up “subversive alliances capable of threatening the social order” and to mobilize their cultural capital in the name of important social and political critiques (Bourdieu 1996, 387; 1992, 48).

⁸ In conceiving of a properly reflexive sociology, Bourdieu himself acknowledges the influence of Ferdinand de Saussure, who proposed an intellectual method “that could ‘present simultaneous complications in several directions’ as a means of grasping the correspondence between the structure of social space...and the structure of the space of the symbolic properties attached to those groups” distributed within it (2010, 120). Cf. Kögler 2011, 273-278.

The Elitism of Reflexive Sociology

The 1996 short essay, “Social Scientists, Economic Science and the Social Movement” gives some sense of how autonomous intellectuals might contribute to existing social movements.⁹ Bourdieu suggests that “new forms of communication” must be forged “between researchers and activists, which means a new division of labour between them” (1998, 57). And while he denies that social scientists should assume the role of “figureheads” or “offer a programme” for social change, they are clearly expected to play a decisive role in destroying the doxa of neoliberalism reproduced by journalism and television (ibid., 56-57). They should also “invent new forms of expression that [can] communicate the most advanced findings of research,” which would contribute greatly to organizing a properly internationalist struggle against the continuing onslaught of neoliberalism (1998, 56-57).

The weakness of Bourdieu’s arguments for autonomous intellectual practices have not been lost on his many critics. To Burawoy, Bourdieu’s defense of the social sciences epitomizes the self-delusion of Gramsci’s traditional intellectual, “who through defending autonomy becomes all the more effective in securing the hegemony of the dominant classes” (2012b, 12). Wacquant made a similar point with regards to cultural production when he directly asked Bourdieu “how we can reasonably expect those who have a monopoly over the universal to undermine their own privilege” (1992, 88). After

⁹ In the 1980s and 1990s, Bourdieu revised his political stance for a second time, and took on an increasingly activist role as a public intellectual. Some writers have seen his later, polemical writings on neoliberalism and ideological control as a theoretical break with his earlier scientific approach to domination. He was even confronted by his bibliographer Yvette Deslaut, who leveled that same charge at him. In response, “Bourdieu recognized that the aims of these writings were different, and should be seen rather ‘as arms for political combat’ than academic texts, but denied any transgression of analysis, and, indeed, argued that many of them were based firmly on analyses involving his established thinking tools—*habitus*, *field*, *capital*, etc.” (Grenfell 2004, 162).

admitting “that this is one of the major contradictions of any cultural policy,” Bourdieu doubles down on his claim that “reflexive vigilance” to the sociology of culture can help us to break with “the scholarly doxa and with all the ‘professional’ ideologies” and allow for the pursuit of universal values (ibid., 89, 88).

The problem, as Yves Sintomer has pointed out, is that even this idealized version of revolutionary consciousness-raising pertains only to the select few:

La "politique" dont il s'agit ne peut être le fait que de figures très spécifiques et ne renvoie pas à l'action des citoyen(ne)s ordinaires....Au nom de la “rupture” que la science introduit nécessairement par rapport au sens commun, la tentation est forte de dénier aux citoyen(ne)s ordinaires tout sens critique politique et de faire de l'accès potentiel à la lucidité l'apanage du sociologue. (1996, 11)

[The politics at hand can only be realized by particular individuals and is not accessible to the average citizen...As a result of the break with common sense that science necessarily creates, there is a strong temptation to deny average citizens a critical political consciousness and to make lucid thinking the exclusive, privileged property of sociology. (translation mine)]

This immediately returns us to Burawoy and Gramsci’s critique of the traditional intellectual. As Sintomer suggests, the privileged lucidity that Bourdieu affords to sociologists represents a fatal obstacle to the democratization of culture, because it requires that defenders of the universal first accrue enough social and cultural capital to effectively disseminate their own values and knowledge to the rest of society (Lane 2000, 197-198; cf. Ross 1991, xix; Fowler 2011, 47-50, 54-55). We have already witnessed Bourdieu’s contempt for the political vapidness of “free-floating” intellectuals like Sartre,

who, “haunted by ‘the project of being God,’ [defend against] every sort of reduction to the general, the type, the class” by clinging to the transcendent “ideology of the utopian thinker” (2010, 474). But as Burawoy rightly retorts, what could be more elitist or utopian than “trusting intellectuals, the historic bearers of neoliberalism, fascism, racism, Bolshevism and so forth to be the saviors of humanity” (2012b, 12; cf. Lane 2000, 183)?

Bourdieu and Wacquant’s recourse to reflexivity in *Reflexive Sociology* also does little to mitigate the political elitism of sociologists’ special connection to universal values. This is because the “sociology of sociology” that makes reflexivity possible is itself dependent on scientific values—and the reserves of capital that enable scientific research. When asked to articulate a “concrete form of action or organization” that would ensure scientific reflexivity, Bourdieu proposes a “rational politics of the management of relations with the suppliers of research funds” in order to safeguard the intellectual autonomy of researchers (1992, 182-183). Given that these suppliers are identified as “governments, foundations or private patrons,” and that, ideally, sociology would be free to “define its social demand and functions on its own” (ibid. 182, 187), the dominated classes neither participate in nor contribute materially to the process of informing sociological practice. For anyone not already convinced that “science is still the best tool we have for the critique of domination” (1992, 194), Bourdieu and Wacquant’s arguments for reflexivity begin to look like any other strategy for intellectual distinction, conditioned in this case by the habitus of social science. The “symbolic subversion of stances” criticized in *Distinction* is arguably embodied in sociological reflexivity itself—an intellectual discipline that lends “the appearanc[e] of intellectual vanguardism” as well as “the gratifications of a simultaneously ethical...and political snobbery” that come with

any claim to intellectual supremacy (2010, 453; cf. Burawoy 2012b, 12-13).

Over the course of the 1980s and 90s, Bourdieu made repeated attempts to articulate a form of intellectual practice consistent with his analysis of social domination, but which would enable some form of effective political resistance to the onslaught of neoliberalism (Bourdieu 1998; Lane 2000, 166-191). As I have tried to argue (following theorists such as Sintomer, Lane and Burawoy), these efforts were ultimately unsuccessful because Bourdieu's defense of intellectual praxis embodies precisely the elitist ideological blindness he himself diagnosed in traditional leftists such as Sartre. The political stance articulated in later works like *Reflexive Sociology* and *Acts of Resistance* actually dilutes the radical potential of his earlier work in *Reproduction* and especially *Distinction*.

Bourdieu's major writings of the 1970s were at least consistent in their critique of social domination. Existing social hierarchies are arbitrary and ultimately unjustifiable because they are founded on illegitimate distinctions, tastes and dispositions. And because this cultural hierarchy is imposed rather than earned, the Bourdieu who wrote *Distinction* is willing to concede that it is

impossible ever to determine whether [a] dominant feature [of culture] appears as distinguished or noble [solely] because it is dominant...The properties attached to the dominant—Paris or Oxford accents, bourgeois 'distinction' etc.—have the power to discourage the intention of discerning what they are 'in reality', in and for themselves. (2010, 85)¹⁰

¹⁰ In a lengthy postscript entitled "Towards a 'Vulgar' Critique of 'Pure' Critiques," Bourdieu takes this point even further by arguing that the principle of "pure" taste, on which social agents base so many of their strategies for distinction, embodies nothing so much as an arbitrary "disgust [for] the facile and obvious" (2010, 488). So-called "simple" tastes (typically identified with "the infantile taste for sweet

Counter to the later Bourdieu of *Reflexive Sociology* who will attempt to walk back from the radical skepticism of this argument, towards a defense of universal values, here Bourdieu questions the ethical integrity of every single cultural and political stance. This position is the strength of *Distinction*: a radical skepticism that dismantles the hierarchical sensibility of late capitalism and calls on us to reject the distinctions that naturally structure our everyday lives.

In the next chapter I will advocate for an anarchist response to this call, by exploring theories of prefiguration developed by writers such as Nathan Jun, Benjamin Franks and Todd May. Like Bourdieu's ideal form of reflexive sociology, prefigurative action attempts to redress existing social hierarchies. In this case, however, the framework of political action it presupposes is consistent with principles of political equality. Furthermore, anarchists who incorporate the principles of prefiguration into their own activism are compelled, by the very nature of anarchistic cooperation and political dialogue, to grapple with the genealogical basis of their own political stances. Although genealogy does not, in and of itself, render anarchism immune to the logic of distinction, it can expose new contradictions between social actors' self-defined political projects and, as Bourdieu might argue, "the implicit programme betrayed by [their] habitus" (2010, 426).

liquids...or the quasi-animal gratifications of sexual desire") are disdained precisely because their cultural significance is easily decoded—and therefore demand little in the way of ascetic effort (Bourdieu 2010, 489, 488). Disgust at sensual pleasure, however, is a "paradoxical experience," in that it represents "an enjoyment extorted by violence, an enjoyment which arouses horror" (ibid., 490). For the social aristocracy, cultivating and embodying this disgust is essential in distinguishing the asceticism of culture in opposition to an "imaginary site of uncultivated nature, barbarously wallowing in pure enjoyment" (ibid., 492). In *Reflexive Sociology*, Bourdieu makes the interesting claim that he had actually written and discarded a postface to *Distinction* in which he defended asceticism against arguments for aesthetic and cultural relativism (1992, 87). If so, his defense would have made for jarring reading when juxtaposed with this actually published critique.

Chapter Two: Prefiguration

Like Bourdieu, the intellectual tradition of anarchism is concerned with the logic of social domination, and has generated robust debate on how existing inequalities function and reproduce themselves. *Distinction*'s nuanced account of social and cultural capital can enrich the anarchist critique of hierarchy. Anarchist theorists also share Bourdieu's well-founded suspicion of revolutionary intellectuals. Even before the 1864 formation of the First International, writers such as Pierre-Joseph Proudhon and Mikhail Bakunin were warning of the authoritarianism implicit in the Communist writings of Marx and Pierre Leroux, suggesting that this model of revolution would reproduce social domination.

In fundamental ways, however, anarchism diverges radically from *Distinction*'s understanding of social control and human agency. In stark contrast to Bourdieu's pessimistic conception of class habitus, anarchist theorists typically contend that dominated social groups are capable of overcoming their class-consciousness and cooperating with other (more culturally distinguished) political subjects for revolutionary change. This claim can be substantiated, in my view, by following two distinct lines of reasoning. Using David Graeber's *Utopia of Rules* and James C. Scott's *Seeing Like a State*, I will first challenge the assumption implicit in Bourdieu's work that, in everyday capitalist relations, the dominant classes define the parameters of cultural life and ensure that the dominated all "run in the same direction" (2010, 159). In reality, elites must depend on informal systems of social reproduction to maintain political and cultural control—systems that must, in fact, be organized by dominated groups and require their political creativity.

I will also revisit the May '68 crisis in France, as analyzed by Graeber, Peter Marshall and Daniel Guérin, who offer a dramatically different reading of the protests than Bourdieu's *Homo Academicus*. Although the revolutionary potential of the movement proved to be short-lived, segments of the French working class engaged in radically egalitarian cooperation with striking students, and in many cases actually disobeyed the directives of their political leadership to demonstrate their solidarity. At the very least, I will argue, political eruptions like Paris '68 demonstrate that the "resigned recognition of status-linked incompetence" embodied by the dominated factions of class societies is not the political death sentence *Distinction* makes it out to be (cf. 2010, 432, 467). Historically unequal segments of society are capable of cooperating democratically for revolutionary change, and the mere "fact that human beings live in incommensurable worlds," as Graeber argues, "has rarely prevented them from effectively pursuing common projects" (2009, 329).

Anarchists are rarely content to simply argue for the possibility of a democratic social revolution. In line with Proudhon and Bakunin's critique of revolutionary leadership (as well as Bourdieu's analysis of Sartrean intellectuals), they insist that existing inequalities cannot be resolved solely by cultivating an intellectually complex critique of hierarchy, or a distinctive revolutionary stance. Instead, egalitarian social relationships and structures must be realized directly through revolutionary practice. While anarchists are by no means united on the form or content of these practices, many take inspiration from an ethical theory of action called "prefiguration," which demands an ethical correspondence between the means and ends of political action. After defining this term and providing some background on its historical influence, I will use the

writings of Graeber, Jun and Franks to argue that prefiguration's moral interrogation of the relationship between revolutionary ideals and revolutionary practices is essential to anarchist revolution.

In order to prevent the intellectual stances or cultural tastes that signify anarchist politics from reifying into countercultural forms of capital, anarchists should interrogate the specific values and social relationships they wish to actually prefigure in society. As Bourdieu pointed out with regards to Sartre, a self-critique that hopes to transcend the logic of distinction cannot depend solely on intellectual "seriousness" or analytical rigor, since the very possession of these qualities constitutes a class privilege (2010, 40, 474). Following Todd May and Jacques Rancière, I will instead suggest that the actual prefiguration of anarchistic values—i.e., a practical effort to realize non-hierarchical relationships by means of democratic cooperation—constitutes the political moment in which anarchists can reckon with the genealogical basis of their political stance. After defining genealogy through recourse to the writings of Jun and May, I will conclude that anarchists must embody a commitment to both prefigurative ethics and genealogical critique in their political practice, if they truly wish to overturn existing social inequalities.

The Anarchist Critique of Revolutionary Elitism

The anarchist intellectual tradition has displayed a consistent and deep antipathy for nearly all historical forms of social domination. As Jun argues in *Anarchism and Political Modernity*, anarchism's broader

critique of...coercive authority has...extended well beyond states and governments to include centralized, hierarchical, and exploitative economic systems...religious ideologies and sexual relations. (2012, 118)

Virtually every major anarchist theorist of note has written on some form of domination pervading modern society, and Jun references more than ten influential thinkers—including Proudhon, Emma Goldman, Carlo Cafiero, Peter Kropotkin and Rudolf Rocker—to substantiate his claim (ibid., 118-119; cf. Marshall 2008, esp. 36-52).

Bourdieu himself cites (with an equal measure of approval and condescension) Proudhon's polemic against the artistic avant-gardes of his day (2010, 41; cf. Cohn 2003). In the place of ethical principles like justice and honesty, vanguards impose a hierarchy of aesthetic distinctions that privilege the mastery of artistic forms. Yet "art for art's sake" contains no "legitimacy within itself, being based on nothing, [it] is nothing" (Proudhon, quoted in Bourdieu 2010, 41-42). Within this ethical vacuum, the production of aesthetic forms is reduced to an elitist competition, in which every artist

endeavours to distinguish himself by one of the means which contribute to the execution... Each strives to have his own trick, his own 'je ne sais quoi,' a personal manner, and so, with the help of fashion, reputations are made and unmade. (ibid., 42)

These remarks, written in the mid-1840s as part of *Système des contradictions économiques*, speak to Proudhon's early sensitivity to ideologies of artistic expression, and the ways in which aesthetic objects can function either as a vehicle of creative emancipation or as a symbol of cultural dominance (Cohn 2003, 54-57). His 1849 essay, "The State: Its Nature, Object and Destiny," directs a related critique at France's

revolutionary Left, particularly the state socialism advocated by Louis Blanc and Pierre Leroux. After dismissing their claim that “The State, under democratic rule, is the power of all the people [and] the reign of liberty,” Proudhon suggests that the state’s right to organize economic and intellectual labour implies a right to “create and direct” the very parameters of creative expression (1849). “Instead of continually adding to individual liberty and dignity,” the revolution proposed by Blanc and Leroux would only serve to reestablish a different form of arbitrary authority and “absorb the citizen into the State” (ibid).

In an 1846 letter to Marx, Proudhon further argues that the very act of legitimizing any one model of socialist organizing at the expense of others is to risk “indoctrinating the people” with a false intellectual dogmatism—“the religion of logic, the religion of reason” (1846). Any vanguardist attempt to seize power in the name of popular struggle would merely redefine “revolutionary action as a means of social reform, because that pretended means would simply be an appeal to force, to arbitrariness, in brief, a contradiction” (ibid.). Twenty years later, Bakunin greatly expanded on these ideas in *Marxism, Freedom and the State*, a polemic against the authoritarian wing of the First International:

The Communists are the upholders of the principle and practice of authority; the Revolutionary Socialists have confidence only in liberty. Both equally supporters of that science which must kill superstition and replace faith, the former would wish to impose it; the latter will exert themselves to propagate it so that groups of human beings, convinced, will organize themselves and will federate spontaneously, freely, from below upwards, by their own movement and

conformably to their own interests, but never after a plan traced in advance and imposed on the “ignorant masses” by some superior intellects. (Bakunin, quoted in Jun 2012, 131)

These brief excerpts are by no means a definitive refutation of Marx’s revolutionary theories, nor do they prove that state socialism is, in fact, a contradiction in terms.¹¹ For our purposes, what is important to take away is the attention paid to the relationship between revolutionary stances and revolutionary practices. As the passage above makes clear, Bakunin is not disagreeing with the Communists’ analysis of capitalism, or their forecast of future revolutionary struggles. The objection, as Jun suggests, stems from the arbitrary authority granted to the Communist leadership’s representation of revolutionary conditions—a representation that is superior to the political “ignorance of the masses” (2012, 130, 135-136).¹² This power inequality effectively delegates the political power of the dominated classes to those who can “objectively” identify and represent their interests (May 1994, 47-50; cf. Jun 2012, 130-131).

¹¹ Both authors—as well as countless other anarchist theorists—have written extensively on these subjects elsewhere. See, for instance, Bakunin 1971, 323-351; Marshall 2008, 12-35, Kołakowski 2005, 256.

¹² While it would be unfair to hold Marx directly responsible for the authoritarianism of later Marxist-inspired struggles, it can be said that the anarchist suspicion of revolutionary vanguardism was vindicated by historical experience over the course of the 20th century. By way of an example, Leszek Kołakowski observed of the 1917 Russian Revolution that the Bolsheviks claimed to represent proletarian consciousness “not because the proletariat agree[d] that it should, but because the party kn[ew] the laws of social development and underst[ood] the historical mission of the working class according to Marxist theory. In this schema, the empirical consciousness of the working class appears as an obstacle, an immature state to be overcome, and never as a source of inspiration” (2005, 669; cf. Graeber 2007, 303-304).

Conceptions of Social Domination: Anarchists and Bourdieu

In certain respects, this brings anarchist arguments against revolutionary hierarchies into conversation with Bourdieu's critique of political distinction. There is the same insistence that no cultural or political stance is truly disinterested or autonomous from existing power relations; the same suspicion of "utopian" revolutionary thinking, which disavows the elitist relationship of the theorist to existing social movements and dominated groups; and the same recognition that legitimating one particular revolutionary stance ultimately results in the de-legitimization of others.

Just as importantly, there is a shared belief that the reproduction of social domination is neither natural nor inevitable. Recall Bourdieu's argument that the race for distinction constitutes "a form of class struggle which the dominated classes allow to be imposed on them when they accept the stakes offered by the dominant classes," and which leads to a self-defeating acceptance "of things as they are" (2010, 164, 467). *Distinction's* structural account of class habitus, as discussed in the last chapter, suggests that this acceptance of domination is not self-willed but rather the result of symbolic violence. The ability of elites to control what is and is not culturally legitimate has the effect of mystifying what are in fact arbitrary cultural distinctions; this causes dominated groups to misrecognize their own class position as a natural lack of "personal uniqueness" (ibid, 464-468, 158; Burawoy 2012b, 9-10).

Anarchists, traditionally, have also argued that elites must continuously work to mystify the consciousness of dominated social groups, in order to maintain their rule. In the *Ecology of Freedom*, Murray Bookchin goes so far as to suggest that, "just as

aggression flexes our bodies for fight or flight, so class societies organize our psychic structures for command or obedience” (1982, 89). This formulation brings us close to *Distinction*’s conception of class habitus, since Bookchin is essentially suggesting that the social conditioning imposed by hierarchical society—what he calls an “epistemology of rule”—is itself a “structuring structure,” one that “organizes practices and the perception of practices...[and] is itself the product of internalization of the division into social classes” (Bourdieu 2010, 17, 166; *ibid.* 89-118).

Noam Chomsky, meanwhile, has written extensively on the “manufacturing of consent” in contemporary American society. *Hegemony or Survival*, from 2003, examines the ideological impact of the advertising and public relations industries, “modern institutions of thought control” that have developed sophisticated “techniques for controlling the public mind” (7-8; Chomsky and Herman 1988, 1-36). These arguments are a perfect compliment to *Distinction*’s critique of advertising, which “ensure[s] the symbolic integration of the dominant classes” by “imposing needs” for luxury goods and life-styles (2010, 149-150).

Bookchin and Chomsky’s arguments are representative of (or consistent with) the anarchist understanding that dominated groups must be ideologically coerced into accepting their domination by others. Bourdieu, too, affirms this understanding, and many anarchists would certainly agree with his suggestion that there is “every difference in the world” between political stances that develop out of a specific ethos or unique historical experience and those that develop in accordance with the “production of political opinions” by social elites (2010, 421). In its careful and nuanced analysis of the logic of social domination, *Distinction* can offer anarchist theory some valuable critical

insights. First, it provides a sound analytical framework to address the embodied and subconscious forms of capital that structure social experience. Secondly, and relatedly, Bourdieu's critique of French counterculture might help would-be revolutionaries to better understand the complex ways in which discourses and stances that oppose the political status quo can merely "contest one culture in the name of another"—that is, implicitly reaffirm the basic legitimacy of hierarchical social distinctions (2010, 248).

Anarchism and Bourdieu: Differences in Theory

The sociological insights afforded by works such as *Distinction* can certainly enrich and deepen anarchist conceptions of existing social hierarchies and ideological control. However, as soon as we turn to the question of how to formulate a proper revolutionary response to existing hierarchies—one that does not fall into the trap of reproducing the logic of political distinction—anarchists and Bourdieu diverge almost immediately. Recall that *Distinction* concludes on a note of profound pessimism, with the suggestion that "the classificatory schemes which underlie agents' practical relationship to their condition" imprint every habitus with an "illusion of the absence of limits," and this in fact constitutes the boundaries of political agency (2010, 486). For Bourdieu, these boundaries can be overcome through reflexive sociological analysis, because the "knowledge of determinations that only science can uncover [are what enable] a form of freedom which is the condition and correlate of an ethic" (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 198). He is therefore suggesting that the work of theoretical analysis necessarily precedes the creation of an ethical stance.

Anarchists, however, attempt to organize a dialectical relationship between ethical political action and ethical deliberation. In Jun's words, "the definitive feature of all forms of anarchism [is] a moral claim—namely, that all forms of coercive authority are morally evil" and that "freedom and equality [should be promoted and affirmed] in all spheres of human existence" (2012, 115-6; cf. Cohn 2006, 96). This immediately distinguishes anarchist practices from both Marxism—with its emphasis on "scientific" materialism—and the reflexive sociology of Bourdieu, because it does away with any hard-and-fast separation between intellectual and ethical deliberation. In Graeber's words, where "Marxism has tended to be a theoretical or analytical discourse about revolutionary strategy...[a]narchism has tended to be an ethical discourse about revolutionary practice" (2007, 304).

As we shall see, this emphasis on ethics dramatically impacts the scale and orientation of anarchism's repertoire of revolutionary practices. For now, it is crucial to recognize that anarchism asserts that social actors can transcend their historical experience of social inequality. Whatever the truth of Graeber's claim that anarchism and Marxism represent two distinct political philosophies, both reject *Distinction's* implicit claim that the ideological control of the dominated by the dominant is definitive and irreversible.

Recall, for instance, Burawoy's comparison of Bourdieu's habitus with Gramsci's notion of hegemony. "For Bourdieu," he argues, the "common sense" of social reality structured by a class habitus "is simply a blanket of bad sense for everyone except possibly for a few sociologists who miraculously see through the fog" (Burawoy 2012b, 10). Gramsci, on the other hand, suggests that the nature of consciousness always allows

for the cultivation of a “good sense” that can override hegemony:

The active man-in-the-mass has... [a] theoretical consciousness [that] can indeed be historically in opposition to his activity. One might almost say he has two theoretical consciousnesses (or one contradictory consciousness): one which is implicit in his activity and which in reality unites him with his fellow-workers in the practical transformation of the real world: and one, superficially explicit or verbal, which he has inherited from the past and uncritically absorbed. But this verbal conception is not without its consequences. It holds together a specific social group, it influences moral conduct and the direction of the will, with varying efficacy, but often powerfully enough to produce a situation in which the contradictory state of consciousness does not permit of any action, any decision or any choice, and produces a condition of moral passivity. (quoted in Burawoy 2012b, 9)

Anarchist Conceptions of Human Nature and Freedom

Many anarchist theorists, however, have expanded on similar conceptions of a dual, contradictory consciousness to explain the disjuncture between human beings’ potential for political equality and their historical submission to social domination. In line with Jun’s early argument that anarchism is first and foremost a moral doctrine, Judith Suissa suggests that the social anarchist tradition founded by Bakunin and Kropotkin “acknowledged human nature to be innately twofold, involving both an essentially egoistical potential and a sociable or altruistic potential” (2011, 25). Bakunin’s argument,

discussed earlier, that the masses can “federate spontaneously, freely...by their own movement and conformably to their own interests,” also implies that human beings possess an innate capacity for equitable decision-making. Crucially, this capacity alone does not entail actualization of equality in the course of social living: Bakunin argues that “man has two opposed instincts, egoism and sociability” (qtd in Suissa 2010, 25-26), and man can free himself from his egoistic potential

only by collective and social labour, which alone can transform the earth into an abode favourable to the development of humanity... Without such material emancipation the intellectual and moral emancipation of the individual is impossible. He can emancipate himself from the yoke of his own nature, that is subordinate his instincts and the movements of his body to the conscious direction of his mind. (qtd in Jun 2012, 125).

Chomsky makes a similar distinction between two views of human nature in a collection of essays titled *On Anarchism*. One view imbues us with the capacity “to inquire and to create, free of external compulsion,” while the other conceives of humans as “empty organisms, malleable, products of their training and cultural environment,” and offers “few moral barriers to compulsion, [the] shaping of behavior, or manufacture of consent” (2005, 174). While conceding that the latter view is confirmed by everyday experiences of domination, Chomsky ultimately argues that the former is continually manifested in historical change and the many social actors who challenge “the legitimacy of established coercive institutions” (ibid. 174-175). However, he rejects the idea that one nature must necessarily triumph over the other: if the “empty organism view” has “gained status and become entrenched” in present-day society, it is because the “the beneficiaries

are those whose calling is to manage and control, who face no serious moral barrier to their pursuits if empty organism doctrines are correct” (ibid. 174). For Chomsky, as for Bakunin, the actualization of our creative or altruistic nature constitutes a political act, because it inevitably conflicts with the power inequalities that sustain a hierarchical status quo (ibid.; Chomsky 2003, 9-10; Jun 2012, 125, 174).

Anarchist Views of Existing Social Creativity

Many anarchist theorists would also seek to challenge the larger assumption in Bourdieu’s work that, in everyday capitalist relations, the dominant classes actually do define the parameters of cultural life and ensure that the dominated all “run in the same direction” (2010, 159). Anthropologist James C. Scott,¹³ for example, argues that while every state expresses the authoritarian desire “to shape the natural and social environment after their [own] image,” elites must rely on a “necessarily thin, schematic model” of reality to exercise state power, one that is “inadequate as a set of instructions for creating a successful social order” (1998, 398, 310). He concludes that formal structures of state governance are parasitically dependent upon “informal processes that, alone, it could not create or maintain” (elsewhere defined according to the Greek term *mētis*, “ways of operating”; ibid, 6, 309-342).

Returning to Bourdieu’s own conception of the logic of distinction, Scott’s argument makes good, intuitive sense. Legitimate culture, recall, is distinguished precisely by its disinterest in the function and economic basis of cultural objects, “a

¹³ Scott does not himself identify as an anarchist, but many of his works—particularly *Seeing Like a State* (1998) and *Two Cheers for Anarchism* (2012)—directly take up anarchist themes and arguments.

distance from necessity” that is meant to express “a supreme manifestation of ease” (2010, 48). A side effect of this disinterest, however, is that elites lack any nuanced understanding of the complex social processes that actually make the exercise of distinction possible. That knowledge is delegated to the dominated classes, who must actually figure out how to produce the distinctive goods and services that the dominant wish to consume (cf. Burawoy 2012a, 5-6). Put another way: if political distinction disinclines elites to recognize their “perverse relation to the social world,” how could this not also blind them to the creative processes sustaining that relationship (Bourdieu 2010, 474)?

From one angle, this ideological myopia, if it exists, would not fundamentally change the logic of cultural domination identified in *Distinction*. Both Scott and Graeber admit that, despite elites’ simplistic understanding of the social forces that allow them to rule, they *do* still rule: in controlling the state, they continuously express the supremacy of their political interests through the bureaucratic regulation of everyday life (or, to use Scott’s own expression, state agents play the “authoritative tune to which most of the population must dance;” 1998, 83; cf. Graeber 2015, 73). Scott himself emphasizes that the degradation caused by social domination of some over others creates a “less innovative, less resourceful population” (1998, 349). Police forces, who are most directly responsible for enforcing the schematic orders handed down from political elites, are in fact obligated to try and shut down any spontaneous, self-organizing groups they come into contact with (Graeber 2015, 57-59). As Graeber has argued in *Direct Action* and *The Utopia of Rules*, “if bureaucracy is largely a method of imposing...simplistic rubrics systematically, then bureaucratic violence should logically consist first and foremost of

attacks on those who insist on alternative interpretations” (2009, 519; 2015, 72-75).

Elites must therefore continuously reassert their dominant position in culture using various state mechanisms. Nonetheless, this control is not as all consuming as Bourdieu suggests. The necessity of *mētis* for the basic task of social reproduction makes an enormous difference, because it means that distinction is not simply an arbitrary but a *reactive* cultural force. The state can only issue large-scale schematic commands whose real power is dependent on forces and labour that the state cannot ever fully recognize or control.¹⁴ In the words of Jeremy Lane, “*Distinction* confuses the *inherent capacity* of certain social groups for formal invention...with consideration of the *institutional and societal constraints* which ensure that the richness and formal inventiveness of popular cultures are so frequently disparaged and denigrated” (his emphasis; 2000, 164).

To anarchists this point is essential, because it means the difference between arguing that dominated groups

A) might be capable of organizing new systems of social reproduction at some point in the future; or

B) are already responsible for providing the material basis of modern living, and can almost certainly coordinate social functioning more equitably and creatively than their current masters.

If the answer is indeed B rather than A, this dispenses with any need to respect or manage current distinctions between mental and manual labour. B also helps to explain why elites

¹⁴ On this point, Marx’s analysis of alienated labour in *Capital* remains highly relevant: “The labourer looks at the social nature of his labour, at its combination with the labour of others for a common purpose, as he would at an alien power; the condition of effecting this combination is alien property, the squandering of which would be totally indifferent to him if he were not compelled to economize with it” (quoted in Kołakowski 2005, 231). Capitalist producers, meanwhile, are “indifferent to the particular use-value and distinctive features of any commodity [they] produc[e]” (ibid. 232). Cf. Graeber 2007, 302-305.

must resort to “the manufacturing of consent” in order to maintain power. If dominated groups were able to recognize the true significance of their own socio-economic creativity, why would they accept an inferior social position (Chomsky 2003, 5-10; Graeber 2012, 280-282)?¹⁵ An anarchist revolutionary stance that respects the existing abilities of the dominated classes (option B) is better positioned to overcome the logic of distinction because it rejects the hierarchical assumption that these classes are not equipped to create change.

May '68 Revisited

Against Bourdieu, anarchists claim that it is possible to overcome existing class hierarchies. We can see this claim borne out in the historical record of the May '68 protest. Writers such as Peter Marshall and Daniel Guérin—who directly participated in the May events in Paris—draw very different historical lessons than what is offered by *Homo Academicus*, with its exclusive focus on educational distinction and the crisis of social capital suffered by frustrated students and faculty (Bourdieu 1988, 157, 138; cf. Burawoy 2012a, 6).¹⁶ In fact, the crisis sparked a multitude of experiments in direct

¹⁵The tastes and viewpoints of the dominated classes can be derided, and the labour and intelligence they must regularly employ to keep society going can remain sublimated and non-apparent to themselves, just as Bourdieu (and Marx and Gramsci) would suggest. As Marx argues in *Capital*, “It is not the workman that employs the instruments of labour, but the instruments of labour that employ the workman... By means of its conversion into an automaton, the instrument of labour confronts the labourer during the labour process itself in the guise of capital, of dead labour that enslaves the power of living labour and pumps it dry” (qtd. in Kołakowski 2005, 234). The earlier quote from Gramsci speaks directly to the same point: existing discrepancies between workers’ verbal and practical consciousness are precisely what a) allows them to misrecognize their own “practical transformation of the world,” and b) condemns them to moral passivity.

¹⁶To be clear, I do not mean to suggest that Bourdieu’s analysis is wrong-headed or baseless. If Kristin Ross is right to suggest that the most revolutionary segments of the May '68 uprising have been erased from the historical record, the actions of other, more reformist elements lend credence to *Distinction*’s derisory portrait of an “aristocratic revolt” against the status quo (Ross 2002, esp. 1-7; 2010, 185-187). As Peter Marshall sardonically concludes, “a ten per cent pay rise accepted by the reformist *Confédération*

democracy, few of which obey the logic of distinction (Guérin 1970, 158; Marshall 2008, 549-550; Ross 2002, 11). By many accounts, communication between student protesters and working class trade unions was actually quite advanced, and a number of striking factories had become so radicalized that they were moving in the direction of full self-management by the time solidarity strikes were called off in June (Horn 2004, 109-110; Katsiaficas 1987, 107; Guérin 1970, 158). Several of the labour actions in fact began as wildcat strikes, in active defiance of the traditional Communist Party (PCF) and union leadership (Ross 1982, 168-178; Jun 2011, 166-167).¹⁷

While it has been established that anarchist ideas and practices were prevalent among the '68 protestors,¹⁸ the more important point is that Bourdieu's analysis of events does not correspond to the real organizing that took place on the ground. Existing cultural conditions did not prevent factions of the dominated classes from defining their own political aspirations or from collaborating with revolutionary intellectuals. A wildcat strike in which factory workers proclaim radical solidarity with university students

Générale du Travail and the offer of new elections by [French president Charles] de Gaulle led to the collapse of the strike, and the students left for their holidays and their comfortable family homes" (546; Judt 2005, 409-410). In *The Democracy Project*, Graeber goes further by suggesting that the '68 protests played an important role in dismantling the "political common sense" of the postwar welfare state—and in so doing, inadvertently paved the way for the international consolidation of neoliberalism in the 1970's and '80s (Graeber 2013, 276; Lane 2006, 7-8, cf. Harvey 1989, 43-47). Fifty years after the unrest, there is also little doubt that Western university systems have been incredibly successful at channeling the various academic disciplines into stable forms of social and cultural capital (Bourdieu 1998, 99-101; Lane 2000, 155; Hedges 2009, 89-114). This would seem to support *Distinction's* claim, discussed earlier, that "social struggles are not all, or always, in contradiction with the perpetuation of the established order" (2010, 161).¹⁷ Graeber goes much further in arguing that the wider series of uprisings during 1968—which shook not just Paris, but also Berkeley, New York, and Prague among many others—are better understood as a world revolution that "seized power nowhere, but nonetheless changed everything" (Graeber 2013, 275; cf. Marshall 2008, 546-553). The political crisis provoked by the protestors, and the anti-authoritarian values they helped disseminate across massive segments of civil society, were in fact so provocative that Western states have been forced ever since to divert enormous amounts of their military capacity towards the "securitization" of a restless homeland (Graeber 2013, 276-278; cf. Chomsky 1975).

¹⁸ The politics of several student leaders, such as Daniel Cohn-Bendit, were informed by anarchist writings, particularly those of Bakunin (Marshall 2008, 548). More significant was the major influence of the Situationist International (SI). Two SI works were especially influential on the '68 protestors: Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* and Raoul Vaneigem's *Revolution of Everyday Life*, both published a year earlier and both bearing a strong anarchist influence. Cf. Marshall 2008, 549-553, Marcus 2002, 7-8.

cannot logically be defined as a struggle for capital according to the terms of the dominant classes. It could only be read in this way if the worker's actions and intentions were disregarded, and does not explain why so many would suddenly struggle to distinguish themselves in so unprecedented and risky a fashion (Ross 1991, xi-xii; cf. Lane 2000, 80).¹⁹

At the very least, political eruptions like Paris '68 demonstrate that the "resigned recognition of status-linked incompetence" embodied by the dominated factions of class societies is not the political death sentence *Distinction* makes it out to be (cf. Bourdieu 2010, 432, 467). Under the right circumstances, groups that habitually acquiesce to the wisdom of political leadership are perfectly capable of breaking with their class habitus and developing new revolutionary stances, in line with their own ethos and historical experience of domination (Bourdieu 2010, 432, 467; cf. Burawoy 2012b, 13). As Foucault suggested in a 1972 interview with Gilles Deleuze, the '68 upheavals demonstrated to "the intellectual...that the masses no longer need him to gain knowledge: they know perfectly well, without illusion; they know far better than he and they are certainly capable of expressing themselves" (1972).

The Anarchist Critique of Representation

Finally, anarchists suggest a very different political response to the problem of revolutionary elitism—and, more generally, the logic of political distinction—than

¹⁹ In *May '68 and Its Afterlives*, Ross makes the far more radical argument—perfectly in keeping with anarchist sympathies—that conservative analysis of the '68 protests tends to reproduce the false presumption "that the event had a coherence and a unity and even more wrongly a 'thought' corresponding to it" (2002, 190).

Bourdieu. This difference becomes especially apparent when considering the problem of political representation. *Distinction*'s analysis of France's political parties demonstrates that Bourdieu was well aware of the inequality that arises when political power is delegated to formal representatives. In Bourdieu's words, "the delegate is both a representative who expresses the already expressed opinions of his mandators...and an agent who...follow[s] his own internal programme" (2010, 425). No matter the regime of politics, delegation creates a "logic of political choice [that] entrust[s] to others the task of formulating and imposing political problems or solutions" (ibid.).

For Bourdieu, however, it did not follow that indirect political representation should be avoided or minimized. As late works such as *Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* and *Acts of Resistance* made clear, he remained convinced that enlightened social actors—whether labour federations, reflexive sociologists or "autonomous" writers and painters—can responsibly arbitrate the interests and values of dominated groups. In "Neoliberalism, Utopia of Unlimited Exploitation," a 1998 essay included in *Acts*, he attacks the wide-scale firing of French trade union representatives as well as the unions' "oldest workers," those he characterizes as "the trustees of the traditions of the group" (104). To restore to these important social actors their rightful political importance, Bourdieu calls for the establishment of national and supranational institutions that will "not [be] governed solely by the pursuit of selfish interest and individual profit, [but] which mak[e] room for collectives oriented towards rational pursuit of *collectively defined and approved ends*" (ibid., his emphasis).

Anarchism, by contrast, embodies a wholesale rejection of the state as a political structure—and, more generally, any political entity that relies on delegated

representation. In the words of Jun and May, *all* forms of political “representation, in the anarchist tradition, [are] understood...as an attempt to wrest from people decisions about their lives” (May 1994, 48).²⁰ The political representation of some by others is an inherently oppressive relationship because it entails “divesting individuals and groups of...their power to create, transform and change themselves” (Jun 2012, 127). Perfect “anarchy,” as the term is defined by *Oxford English Dictionary*, amounts to a utopian “social state in which there is no governing person or body of persons, but each individual has absolute liberty” (2016). Such a state would free citizens to represent their own political, social and economic interests according to their own terms, and to define their social, economic and political relationships with others accordingly.²¹

While there are undoubtedly utopian thinkers who argue that anarchism can resolve every form and instance of social inequality, anarchist theorists typically stress the imperfect nature of real political change—and hence the need for continual and unending social revolution (Guérin 1970, 41-43). Jun quotes Errico Malatesta to this effect, in stressing that

social truth is not a fixed quantity, good for all times, universally applicable, or determinable in advance... Instead, once freedom has been secured, mankind will go forward discovering and acting gradually with the least number of upheavals and with a minimum of friction. Thus our solutions always leave the door open to different and, one hopes, better solutions. (quoted in Jun 2012, 129)

²⁰May has not always been totally consistent on the relationship of anarchist theory to political representation, and Cohn especially has rightly criticized the contradictory claim that anarchism means “the rejection of representation” (May 1994, 47). Cf. Cohn 2006, esp.13-14.

²¹Many anarchists have speculated on the nature and meaning of political freedom afforded by anarchist social relationships. For a historical review of anarchist theory on the subject, see Marshall (2008, esp. 36-52, 263-308), or Guérin (1970, esp. 27-33). Ursula K. Le Guin’s 1974 novel *The Dispossessed* is still widely read for its compelling vision of an anarchistic society on the fictional planet of Anarres. Cf. Graeber 2009, 218-219.

Further to the point, anarchistic revolution does not transcend the basic distance between political relationships and the representation of politics. Political cooperation necessarily involves some form of language, which is itself a deeply imperfect and hierarchical system of communication. As Jesse Cohn recently argued, following Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau, linguistic systems inevitably “attempt to dominate the field of discursivity, to arrest the flow of differences, to construct a centre” of meaning (quoted in Cohn 2006, 244).²² In the very attempt to develop an ideal society, anarchists must face the challenge of using tools of communication that bear the historical imprints of domination (Cohn 2006, 14-15). Nevertheless, anarchists remain cautiously optimistic that, in Cohn’s words, “non-hierarchical social arrangements, consensus and direct democracy make it possible to perpetually intervene in one’s own representation,” by organizing a social arena in which political actors can safely “withdraw the authority of an errant signifier and replace it with a better one” (ibid., 256).²³

To be clear, anarchism’s concern with radically democratizing the politics of representation does not prevent anarchist groups from generalizing about the nature of social domination experienced by individual members. Overarching analytical categories such as gender or race, which allow us to generalize about political and ideological commonalities, remain valid in anarchist practice (cf. May 1994, 12-13). As Franks argues, class is “still important to anarchism because in most contexts...capitalism is one

²² Developing this point further, we can also refer back to *Distinction*’s rightful emphasis on the political significance of non-verbal communication accomplished by bodily dispositions, which, “functio[n] below the level of consciousness and...beyond the reach of introspective scrutiny or control by the will” (2010, 468, 467).

²³ Anarchists are by no means united in this view of the emancipatory potential of linguistic representation. John Zerzan, for example, has argued that “‘freedom of speech’ does not exist; grammar is the invisible ‘thought control’ of our invisible prison. With language we have already accommodated ourselves to a world of unfreedom” (1999, 35).

of the main oppressive powers” (2006, 155); likewise, feminist writers have “recognized similarities in the operation of power in the workplace, leisure faculties and private sphere, which developed into a general concept of patriarchy, whose operation subtly alters depending on context” (ibid.). These analytical categories therefore still hold potential for identifying common interests, but individuals must always be afforded the opportunity to deviate from the generalization. The fact that power inequalities do change according to context, however subtly, is one of the reasons that anarchists believe political representation should almost never be delegated (May 1994, 116-119).

Prefiguration

As evidenced by our discussion of early anarchist thinkers, anarchism holds that ethically grounded political action (as opposed to intellectual deliberation) can ultimately improve our ethical relationship to power and knowledge (ibid., 123-125). Recall that “moral and intellectual emancipation,” as conceived by Bakunin, must be achieved socially, in concert with political equals. Rather than try to devise an ideal stance towards the political revolution of socially unequal relationships, recent anarchist theorists—including Franks, Jun, Cohn, Graeber and May—have instead positioned the very event of revolutionary struggle as the ideal circumstance in which to identify, analyze and transcend social domination. In conceptualizing this process, they each refer back to an ethical theory of action identified as prefiguration, the “building of a new society in the shell of the old.” As Jun defines it, a prefigurative practice

demands coherence between means and ends. That is, if the goal of political

action is the promotion of some value and, by extension, opposition to whatever is at odds with that value, the means and methods employed and acting must reflect or *prefigure* the desired end. (his emphasis; 2012, 130)

It is important to emphasize Jun's open-ended use of the word "value" here. While it has already been argued that anarchists are deeply committed to political equality, prefigurative philosophy does not demand that they invoke this specific ideal in defining their desired end. Nor must anarchists share a perfect understanding of which value they wish to embody in larger society (Graeber 2007, 305; Jun 2012, 131). As Franks argues, anarchism recognizes the impossibility "of impos[ing] a specific moral end which is applicable to all in every circumstance and known in advance" (2006, 98).

This raises questions about the epistemological assumptions at play in prefiguration. Jun argues that prefigurative action involves a conscious rejection of any "transcendent conception of normativity," in the sense that anarchists do not base their ethical deliberations in some abstract (and supposedly universal) set of principles (2012, 77, 132, 89). In Franks' view, this pragmatic stance allows for a canny recognition of the socially constructed nature of reality, in that it does not tie "oppression to an objectively knowable singular power, but realizes that different forces operate in different contexts" (2006, 154).

The radical skepticism implied by these remarks, however, creates tension with Jun's earlier definition of anarchism's moral core: if every anarchist theory "share[s] in common [a] universal condemnation of all forms of coercive authority," and a commitment to democratizing social relationships, just how open to other values and political stances can anarchist practices be (2012, 113)? Cohn, following Bookchin,

suggests that such tensions are, in fact, unavoidable—but also politically productive. By affirming that “anarchism is not a fixed body of theory and practice,” but “a movement in which a core ethic is rearticulated time and time again,” anarchists can make room for intuitive, embodied and never-before-articulated beliefs in political equality (2006, 94).

If Bourdieu is correct that the logic of distinction has ideologically stratified social groups into a hierarchy of classes, such ethical open-mindedness is essential to the prefiguration of a more egalitarian society. As May points out, following Rançière, in order for a political practice to truly prefigure an egalitarian society, it must presuppose that dominated groups do, in fact, possess the intelligence to govern themselves and participate in democratic politics (option B discussed above) (2008, 60-61, 57; cf. Graeber 2013, 196-207). Equality cannot be verified according to standards established by dominant values and tastes, as this would imply that existing hierarchies of political competence are valid rather than arbitrary (May 2008, 57). Rather, “the *demos* [demonstrates its] equality” by its “possession or expression of something that acts as a motivation for thinking oneself equal” (ibid., 70). Ideally, anarchists strive to uncover what that “something” might be, and embody this commitment in democratic organizational processes and genealogical critique—hence May’s earlier argument that direct, democratic decision-making dispenses with “the representational conceit that people have a natural set of interests that their political liberation will allow them to express or fulfill” (cf. Graeber 2009, 531-532). The ideological gambit of prefigurative anarchism is just this: to realize this presupposition of different-but-equal political identities through concrete acts of social cooperation and democratic practice (May 2008, 97-100; Graeber 2002, 71-71).

I should stress the pedagogical nature of such unprecedented political encounters. Discovering new and alien articulations of equality, interrogating the relative consistency of one's own political standards, reconsidering the unique ethical end that should be realized within a specific prefigurative context—all of these constitute unique learning opportunities through which revolutionaries can arrive at some new understanding of their own political stances, and take steps to overcome instances of social domination they find within themselves and their personal relationships (cf. May 1994, 91; Jun 2012, 146). In Franks' words, prefigurative anarchism organizes "a process of immanent critique" within new, emancipatory structures and relationships:

The precepts behind an ideology are examined to show whether they are internally consistent or whether they contradict with that ideology in practice. In carrying out this sort of appraisal of existing social forms, new practices and social relations are formed. The process of critical assessment creates a medium of communication that is consistent with anarchist ambitions. (Franks 2006, 99)

Prefigurative action is also pedagogical in the sense of providing an opportunity and arena in which to practice democratic living. In line with the argument discussed earlier that class societies condition us for hierarchical social relationships, Bookchin points out that

sensibility, ethics, ways of building reality, and selfhood have to be changed by educational means, by a politics of reasoned discourse, experimentation and the expectation of repeated failures from which we have to learn, if humanity is to achieve the self-consciousness it needs to finally engage in self-management. (quoted in Suissa 2010, 74)

Distinction and the Ethical Challenge of Prefiguration

At this point it is worth returning to the problem of intellectual stances, and the ways in which this philosophy of prefigurative action might challenge Bourdieu's own analysis of social domination. *Distinction* makes the striking claim that French experiences of domination are signified primarily by classed social occupations, but also by "secondary properties" that include "ethnic origin and sex" (Bourdieu 2010, 96). This argument is supposedly derived from a sociological reading of official statistics, in which "women and immigrants" failed to "constitut[e] themselves as such within the working class" (ibid., 96-97). The passage undermines the ability of certain citizens (namely women and immigrants) to define their own identities, and relies on arbitrary "scientific" proofs to justify this dispossession. Numerous feminist and postcolonial critics have objected to the claim, suggesting it is either factually untrue, outdated, or both (Burawoy 2012c, 13; 2012d, 5; Wallace 2016; Behnke and Meuser 2001).

From the perspective of prefigurative ethics, however, Bourdieu's error here is not analytical but procedural: how can women and minorities be expected to "constitute themselves," if they are unable to practically intervene in the representation of their domination? As Rancière has argued, the same sociological objectivity that allows *Distinction* to uncover "the tastes and distastes, sympathies and aversions, fantasies and phobias, which, more than declared opinions, forge the unconscious unity of a class" performs a symbolic violence of its own by naturalizing the objectification of dominated groups according to arbitrary categories (Bourdieu 2010, 70; Rancière, quoted in Ross

1991, xii).²⁴

For particular social groups, *Distinction*'s narrow focus on economic domination—misrecognized in everyday life as cultural and social superiority—might help group members make sense of differences in taste and disposition. But some alternative conception of domination might be more useful to a group seeking to define itself. Ultimately, a prefigurative anarchism demands that conceptions of social domination be interrogated democratically, through a dialogue with social equals, rather than simply verified according to analytic criteria determined in advance (as in the case of *Distinction*, and Bourdieu's conception of reflexive sociology more generally). For anarchists committed to prefigurative action, what is at stake is the political opportunity to demonstrate that existing social hierarchies are, in fact, arbitrary and illegitimate: dominated groups really can represent their own interests and experiences, and are already equal to the task of organizing new, democratic relationships and social structures.

Problems with Adopting a Prefigurative Framework

Prefiguration can help anarchists overcome the logic of distinction in their own political practices. Rather than try to legitimize a specific stance towards social

²⁴ A similar line of argument can be applied to my own theoretical assertions as to the nature and ideological coherence of anarchist philosophy. For instance, I have relied exclusively on the writings of a small and exclusively Euro-American group of anarchist thinkers, each of whose influence on the historical tradition of anarchism has been hotly contested. Jun, for example, argues against the idea that Proudhon and Bakunin “shared anything resembling a homogeneous political or philosophical outlook, nor that these men, despite their enormous and far-reaching influence, were the only important thinkers in the pre-1917 anarchist movement” (2012, 111). Joel Olson, meanwhile, argues that “in its classical era from the time of Proudhon in the 1840s to Goldman in the 1930s,” anarchism failed to “ever analyze white supremacy as a relatively autonomous form of power in its own right” (2009, 35). As a result of this historical legacy, “anarchism remains a largely white ideology in the US” (ibid.). See also Graeber 2007, 301-312.

domination (as Bourdieu attempted to do, in the form of reflexive sociology), prefigurative ethics commit anarchists to interrogating the relationship between their own political goals and the social relationships they cultivate. If every form of anarchism connotes, in Jun's words, a "universal affirmation and promotion of freedom and equality in all spheres of human existence" (2012, 116), then prefiguration's equal attention to the process and the goal of social revolution helps anarchists minimize the subconscious distinction between

- A) a political stance that champions formal equality, and
- B) a political practice that embodies exclusive, new forms of cultural capital (what Bourdieu would perhaps identify as a "subversive point of honour"; 2010, 474).

There are, however, two theoretical problems with this argument. Firstly, the theoretical relationship between anarchism and prefiguration is neither natural nor inevitable. The basic formulation of "building of a new society in the shell of the old," for example, originates not with anarchists but with The Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) (Portwood-Stacer 2013, 165). The preamble to the IWW's 1905 constitution, for instance, argues that

the working class and the employing class have nothing in common. There can be no peace so long as hunger and want are found among millions of the working people and the few, who make up the employing class, have all the good things of life...Between these two classes a struggle must go on until the workers of the world organize as a class, take possession of the means of production, abolish the wage system, and live in harmony with the Earth...It is the historic mission of the

working class to do away with capitalism. The army of production must be organized, not only for everyday struggle with capitalists, but also to carry on production when capitalism shall have been overthrown. By organizing industrially, we are forming the structure of the new society within the shell of the old. (IWW 1905)

The anti-capitalist thrust of this call to action would almost certainly elicit anarchist sympathies, if we agree with Franks's earlier argument that capitalism represents "one of the main oppressive powers" that anarchism is seeking to redress. However, the IWW's militaristic metaphors for anti-capitalist struggle betray a vanguardist sensibility distinctly at odds with anarchism's egalitarian ethos. Tracing the etymology of the synonyms "vanguard" and "avante-garde" back to medieval traditions of warfare, Franks suggests their original use described "lead units [that could] win battles on behalf of the Empire on their own" (2006, 105). The IWW allusion to an organized "army of production" perfectly reflects a modern Marxist-Leninist formulation of avante-garde politics, in which the vanguard "party is the legion, whose function is to lead the masses (the undisciplined auxiliary units) in the millennial social conflict to come" (ibid). A vanguardist formulation of revolutionary action implicitly produces a hierarchical relationship between different "units" of a revolutionary army: the prestigious few who plan the terms of attack, and the undisciplined masses who carry it out.

I do not mean to suggest that the IWW preamble must be read as a defense of vanguardism. For our purposes, what is important to note is the troubling malleability of prefiguration as a revolutionary concept, and its conduciveness to revolutionary projects besides anarchist ones. When Cohn and Franks, for example, celebrate the ideological

pragmatism afforded by prefigurative action, there is a presumption that social actors will “rearticulate a core ethic” according to a wildly disparate set of analytic terms and social experiences. But what happens when revolutionary subjects—such as those who drafted the IWW preamble—advocate a form of prefigurative action that fails to “rearticulate” anarchist ethics? Anarchists cannot lay claim to prefiguration, or impose their interpretation of prefigurative action on others.

The second and related problem with connecting anarchism and prefigurative practice arises from anarchism’s troubled and contradictory relationship to avant-garde revolution. Given the disastrous results of vanguardist thinking during the course of the twentieth century—from Stalinist Russia to Maoist China to Cambodia’s Khmer Rouge—it is easy to see why contemporary anarchists might wish to downplay the influence of vanguardism on their philosophy. Jun, for instance, suggests that prefiguration, as a “practical principle, [has been] observed more or less uniformly by anarchists over the past two centuries” (2012, 131), while Franks sets up a dichotomy between prefiguration and vanguardism.

In fact, prefiguration has never been the sole ethical framework of anarchism, but has instead evolved in dialogue with a tradition of vanguardism that never quite withered away. Bakunin, for example, advocated prefigurative action, calling for the masses to “federate spontaneously, freely, from below upwards, by their own movement and conformably to their own interests,” but his own vanguardist political activism prevented that freedom from being realized (Bakunin, quoted in Jun 2012, 131). As Paul Avrich points out,

[f]or all his assaults on revolutionary dictatorship, Bakunin was determined to

create his own secret society of conspirators, whose members would be “subjected to a strict hierarchy and to unconditional obedience.” This clandestine organization, moreover, would remain intact even after the revolution has been accomplished, in order to forestall the establishment of “an official dictatorship.” (1972, xxii)

In *To the Officers of the Russian Army*, Bakunin rationalizes this contradiction by arguing that “the secret organization is a type of staff force in the revolutionary army, and the army is—the entire people” (quoted in Ivianski 1988, 54; Adam 2010). What this amounts to, however, is a total reaffirmation of vanguardist principles, right down to the choice of militaristic metaphor.

Emma Goldman, meanwhile, quotes Ralph Waldo Emerson in in her 1917 essay “Minorities Versus Majorities,” and denigrates the masses as

crude, lame, pernicious in their demands and influence, and need not to be flattered, but to be schooled. I wish not to concede anything to them, but to drill, divide, and break them up, and draw individuals out of them. (1969, 84)²⁵

Vanguardism and Prefiguration

The point here is not to attack past anarchist writers for ideological hypocrisy. Rather, it is to suggest that anarchists are perfectly capable of embodying a vanguardist stance towards political revolution—even while calling for the overthrow of a revolutionary dictatorship, or championing individualism.

Vanguardist and prefigurative politics are not even mutually exclusive, despite

²⁵ In Goldman’s later memoir, *My Disillusionment in Russia*, these sympathies are entirely reversed: Social transformation “must be in the hands of the industrial masses,” and nothing short of a “complete reversal of all...authoritarian principles will...serve the revolution” (1924).

Franks and Jun's arguments to the contrary (cf. Franks 2006, 102-103; Jun 2012, 134-135). Consider *Oxford's* definition of prefiguration as "a person, thing, or event which prefigures or foreshadows another; a prototype, a precursor" (2016). While lacking the overt militarism of Franks' definition of vanguardism, a prefigurative force is the initiator of a historical process, one distinguished by some advancement over existing alternatives. Thus, when Bookchin argues for an anti-Leninist vanguardism, he is correctly pointing out that "a minority social project that advances views in opposition to the conventional wisdom of a time is usually an avant-garde, or a vanguard" (quoted in Cohn 2006, 234).

The problem is that even this avowedly egalitarian project implicitly reproduces a Bourdieusian logic of countercultural distinction, in the sense that anarchists contest present-day "culture in the name of another" (cf. Bourdieu 2010, 248).²⁶ Like with any revolutionary project, there is always the possibility that political actors will misrecognize the privileges that have allowed them to undertake revolutionary action in the first place. As such, anarchists risk reproducing the logic of political distinction even in the work of prefiguration.

Genealogical Critique

Luckily, the very practice of anarchistic social cooperation generates favourable conditions for reducing this risk. By collapsing the difference between the representation of a political project and the act of democratically undertaking this project,

²⁶ Consider Guy Debord's argument in *Society of the Spectacle*, that "ideological respect for unanimity of decision has on the whole been favorable to the uncontrolled authority, within the organization itself, of specialists in liberty; and revolutionary anarchism expects, from the liberated population, the same type of unanimity, obtained by the same means" (1970).

prefigurative anarchism offers political actors a tremendous opportunity to intervene and disrupt the unspoken assumptions behind their project. During the process of practicing prefigurative action, anarchists will encounter differences in opinions, class origins, values and cultural tastes. Since each social actor is responsible for representing their own interests, the entire group will be confronted with very different conceptions of one common political project. This scenario presents the unique pedagogical opportunity for each individual to reckon with the genealogy of her own politics, in what May defines as genealogical critique. According to *Oxford*, genealogy is “an account of one's descent from an ancestor or ancestors, by enumeration of the intermediate persons; a pedigree” (2016); to unearth a genealogy of one’s own politics is to trace the pedigree of the ideas and values that shape one’s political stance (May 1994, 90). As individuals in the group enact their own understanding of a shared ethical and political project, they will be forced to recognize the discrepancy between their assumptions and the assumptions of their fellow activists, and engage in a process of revelatory questioning of themselves and others. This questioning will take the form of an interrogation of the past: political actors will trace the history and emergence of their own distinct experiences of dominance and/or domination, as well as those of others.

It can be argued that Bourdieu himself sought to embrace genealogical critique when he proposed that reflexive sociologists should unearth “the history of the emergence of [the] problems” they study (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 238). Yet as discussed in Chapter One, he makes the problematic assertion that only certain elite actors are equipped to undertake this critique. The result is a replaying of the logic of distinction. Bourdieu makes certain intellectual tools and capacities a precondition for

conducting genealogical critique; anarchism, by contrast, sees only one precondition for genealogical critique: direct, undelegated political collaboration among equals.

When this process of political collaboration takes place, controversies and differences of opinion naturally arise. May, following Rancière, sees the true radical potential of anarchistic social relationships within the potential for dissensus. A truly “democratic politics,” he argues, “is a dissensus, a dissensus from a police order that marginalizes and excludes. In the name of equality ... a demos arises that dissents from the position or positions its members have been allotted” (2008, 47-49). Dissensus is the freedom for dominated political actors to question the representation of political goals, dispositions and priorities, and as such is the catalyst for genealogical critique.

It is difficult to articulate anarchist goals in advance of prefigurative action, but these goals will be heavily dependent on the social dynamics that develop within prefigurative practice. Likewise, for anarchist theories of political revolution not to sabotage the promise of anarchist action, dissensus must be welcomed and cultivated so that one single political stance will not be allowed to dominate others.²⁷ A commitment to both dissensus and the ensuing genealogical critique will enable individual members of a group to compare their own political stances against competing ethical claims.

As May suggests, the presumption of equality in consensus-based anarchist democracy is actually the pedagogical and political source of “entirely unforeseen

²⁷ Benjamin Franks has gone so far as to argue that “anarchism does not require anarchists” to achieve its political revolution (2006, 119). If it were otherwise, if an anarchist stance were perceived to be intrinsic to the task of securing equality, this would immediately reproduce a hierarchical distinction between a vanguard of “specialists in freedom” and “oppressed groups carry[ing] out their own liberation,” who would presumably not have the same, supposedly “advanced” grasp of how to overcome social domination (ibid.).

possibilities of living” (May 1994, 135). Where Bourdieu sought to use a specific set of scientific practices to allow for an objective assessment of social domination, anarchistic social relationships are prefigurative of a pedagogical possibility to interrogate all values, stances, tastes and dispositions through an egalitarian collaboration. Genealogical critique is at the centre of this interrogation. Likewise, May suggests that the embodiment of genealogical critique in political practice can erode the representational conceit “that people have...a natural set of interests that their political liberation will allow them to express or fulfill” (ibid., 97).

The Necessity of Genealogical Critique

As I have demonstrated, anarchism is sensitive to the problem of revolutionary elitism and the extent to which it sabotages revolutionary projects for equality. Prefiguration goes a long way to remedying this weakness: it brings crucial ethical focus to the ends and the means of revolutionary action by collapsing the difference between the two. It therefore diffuses vanguardist tendencies inside the effort to prefigure an egalitarian society. However, the very open-endedness of prefiguration renders it susceptible to new forms of domination and political distinction that may emerge in the very process of defining the collective ethic and action. Paradoxically this same pliancy of prefiguration’s ethical parameters is an asset when the tactic is used in the context of anarchist social relations. Radically egalitarian social cooperation engenders dissensus, inviting as it does the collision of historically unequal political viewpoints. The genealogical critique that arises in the social experience of dissensus can bring about a

fruitful reflection on the presumptions and unequal experiences that have structured political actors.

Genealogical critique is therefore a necessary element of prefiguration precisely because it ensures that any political stance taken does not become legitimized as an inherently superior discourse. As we shall see in chapter three, anarchistic practices of direct action can still recreate arbitrary social hierarchies, because only certain political actors—those who already possess economic and racial privileges—are able to fully participate in these distinctive forms of protest. And because these privileges are not immediately evident in the actual experience of direct action, there is the potential for even radical opposition to state power to be misrecognized in culture as a mark of personal distinction.

Chapter Three: New York's Direct Action Network

Between 1999 and 2002, an activist group formed in New York whose political practices exemplified the prefigurative ethic described in chapter two. The impressive work of this local chapter of the Direct Action Network (DAN-NYC) was carefully documented by Graeber (himself a DAN member) and the critical sociologists Lesley Wood and Francesca Polletta. Though ultimately (and perhaps inevitably) falling short of prefiguration's loftiest ideals, I will suggest that DAN-NYC—and movements that followed in its wake—do accomplish a radical democratization of social relationships. This small, loosely affiliated band of activists not only challenged powerful corporate institutions like the U.S. Republican Party and the Summit of the Americas through recourse to direct action; it organized these challenges along radically egalitarian lines, and in so doing provided a compelling model for democratic protest in the 21st century. The external and internal criticism of DAN-NYC's radically egalitarian consensus process in fact confirms *Distinction's* continuing relevance to anarchist praxis.

After providing some historical context on the origins of DAN-NYC, I will use Graeber's *Direct Action* to establish a connection with theories of prefiguration and anarchism discussed in the last chapter. From there I will discuss the actual practices and experiences of DAN-NYC members discussed by Graeber, Polletta and Wood. The profound disagreements and communication breakdowns identified by all three writers exemplify the spirit of dissensus and genealogical critique—in ways that both affirm and challenge the politics of anarchist prefiguration.

In my concluding remarks I will argue that the racial and class inequalities that

emerged in the course of DAN-NYC's existence demonstrates *Distinction's* continuing relevance to anarchist politics and culture, while at the same time reaffirming the radical promise that comes from connecting anarchism's opposition to social domination with the ethical framework of prefiguration. The work of New York's Direct Action Network demonstrates that anarchist practices can implicitly reproduce a logic of political and cultural distinction, yes, but the dissensus enabled by these practices constitutes a democratic interrogation of activist values and intellectual stances. As such, DAN-NYC provides a compelling model of revolution—not simply as a means for redressing social domination, but also readjusting expectations of the type of social relationships and political experiences that we should try to prefigure.

The Zapatistas, People's Global Action, and the Direct Action Network

Towards the turn of the last century an international movement of activists, unions, leftist militants, farmers alliances, indigenous groups and radical religious communities began to mount a popular opposition to what Chomsky and others have defined as “the Washington Consensus,”

an array of market oriented principles designed by the government of the United States and the international financial institutions that it largely dominates, and implemented by them in...more vulnerable societies, often as stringent structural adjustment programs. (Chomsky 1999, 19-20; Engler 2007).

After a further neoliberal consolidation signified by the disastrous North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) of 1994, a group calling itself the Zapatista Army of

National Liberation (EZLN) managed to seize control of a small region in southern Mexico and initiate a radical experiment in political self-governance and land reform (Engler 2007, Wild 1995; Graeber 2009, xiii, 31-32).

What was later dubbed “the anti-globalization movement” began to crystallize at a 1996 conference hosted by the EZLN in Chiapas. The “International Encounter for Humanity Against Neoliberalism” brought together over 5,000 activists from around the globe and led directly to the establishment of People’s Global Action (PGA) two years later (Wood 2005, 95; Graeber 2009, 31-32). Since its inception, PGA has served as a decentralized, anti-hierarchical network for anti-capitalist struggles around the globe, connecting the EZLN with groups like the Landless Workers Movement in Brazil, the Karnataka State Farmers Union in India, squatter communities in Germany and Italy, as well as innumerable other activist groups around the globe (Graeber 2009, xiii; Wood 2005).

The continental Direct Action Network developed out of this organizational momentum, as a smaller network for groups organizing protests against the World Trade Organization’s (WTO) Seattle conference in November of 1999 (Graeber 2009, 290).²⁸ The perceived success of their planned action, the “Battle in Seattle,” led several American and Canadian groups to re-envision DAN in the months afterwards as “a model for what a truly de-centralized, confederated, directly democratic organization could be like” (ibid, 291). By February 2000, a charter was drafted according to principles laid out

²⁸ Many of the activists who actually developed DAN’s institutional framework were affiliated with the Ruckus Society, an NGO specializing in training and information-sharing for activists interested in nonviolent protest. The organizational work involved in taking this group’s plan from conception to full-fledged reality was far more intricate, and involved activists from all over the globe. For a larger history of the specific groups involved in DAN’s genesis, and their relationship to one another, see Graeber 2009, 290, Wood 2012, 94 and Solnit 2000.

by the PGA (Graeber 2009, xiii; Wood 2005).

Anarchism, Prefiguration and Direct Action

Although these principles were not explicitly anarchist, they included exactly the kind of prefigurative ethical framework and political stance identified in chapter two, namely “an organizational philosophy based on decentralization, direct democracy, and local autonomy,” and “a rejection of all forms of hierarchy, oppression, and exploitation” (Graeber 2009, 292). The DAN charter also called for “nonviolent direct action” and “[a] confrontational attitude toward undemocratic institutions including governments and corporations”—stances that, again, do not require anarchist politics but are certainly concordant with anarchist sensibilities (ibid, 94; cf. Wood 2012, 94, 97). As Graeber argues, direct action is naturally suited to anarchist-style prefiguration,

because in its essence [it] is the insistence, when faced with structures of unjust authority, on acting as if one is already free. One does not solicit the state. One does not even necessarily make a grand gesture of defiance. Insofar as one is capable, one proceeds as if the state does not exist. (2009, 203)

While there is certainly a tacit understanding that existing social hierarchies can and do mobilize resources and manpower to defend their political interests, direct action protestors insist on the illegitimacy of those power inequalities and regularly risk personal injury, emotional trauma and arrest to demonstrate their moral opposition (ibid; Polletta 2002, 192). In the case of DAN-NYC, activists protested the Philadelphia Republican convention of July 2000 and the inauguration ceremonies of George W. Bush

in January 2001, among other gatherings of the elite. Furthermore, in the very *directness* of direct action, protestors enact their refusal to allow existing systems of political representation to arbitrate their grievances or even define what is an allowable form of dissent (Graeber 2009, 203-204). As Noël Sturgeon argues, “the oppositional discourse of the direct action movement has not aimed at becoming part of institutional politics but rather intends to engage the discursive frameworks within which those institutions function and are legitimated” (1995, 42).

Moreover, some of the movement’s overtly festive demonstrations—such as those organized by DAN-NYC affiliate Reclaim the Streets—even dispensed with the need to identify a specific target of political opposition, and focused instead on realizing moments of communal festivity in urban space (Graeber 2009, 381-393; Blanco 2013). Unlike more traditional forms of direct action, such as marches or picket lines, these so-called “carnivals of capitalism” were not primarily aimed at challenging state or corporate authorities; instead, their focus turned inwards, on activist culture itself, and on their right to “experience the full pleasure of freedom in the here and now” (2009, 392; cf. Wood 2012, 78, 93). This shift in emphasis, however, did not change the fact that street party demos were inherently oppositional in their implicit challenge to the authority of police to dictate the terms by which urban space is experience and used.²⁹

²⁹ As both Graeber and Julia Ramírez Blanco have argued, many of the activists involved in street party activism were inspired by the writings of anarchist writer Hakim Bey, who developed the notion of “temporary autonomous zones,” (TAZ) which could theoretically “provide the quality of enhancement associated with the uprising without necessarily leading to violence and martyrdom. The TAZ is like an uprising which does not engage directly with the State, a guerilla operation which liberates an area (of land, of time, of imagination) and then dissolves itself to re-form elsewhere/elsewhen, before the State can crush it” (qtd. in Blanco). Another obvious reference point, particularly for Reclaim the Streets, are the writings of the Situationist International, and their notions of psychogeography and the *dérive*, in which “one or more persons during a certain period drop their relations, their work and leisure activities, and all their other usual motives for movement and action, and let themselves be drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters they find there” (Debord 1956; Graeber 2009, 392; Ferrell 2001, 134-135).

Each distinct DAN-NYC action, suggests Graeber, contributed to a larger repertoire of oppositional demonstrations that embodied the principles and spirit of anarchist revolution:

[T]he form of the action—or at least, the organization of the action—is itself a model for the change one wishes to bring about. At its most basic, it reflects a very simple anarchist insight: that one cannot create a free society through military discipline, a democratic society by giving orders, or a happy one through joyless self-sacrifice. At its most elaborate, the structure of one's own act becomes a kind of micro-utopia, a concrete model for one's vision of a free society. (2009, 210)³⁰

DAN-NYC and the Social Logic of Distinction

And how might Bourdieu have interpreted the actions of DAN, based on his analysis of social hierarchies in *Distinction*? DAN-NYC protests, which typically faced off against armies of riot police and ended in mass arrests, were much more than “a symbolic subversion of stances” (Bourdieu 2010, 453). Nor did these actions implicitly re-affirm the right of elites to define the parameters of political expression, as in Bourdieu’s interpretation of May ’68; such an understanding requires that we disavow

³⁰ It is worth stressing, however, the very important difference between direct action groups “embodying” and merely “reflecting” anarchist political philosophy. For while Polletta (2001, 26) estimated that roughly half of DAN-NYC’s membership identified as anarchists, the direct action movements that preceded DAN, and which profoundly shaped its organizational structures, had in fact developed out of a much larger set of congruent but distinct political cultures. The prominent Clamshell Alliance, for instance, which was probably the first group to organize a direct action using autonomous affinity groups and spokescouncils, was primarily an antinuclear coalition and informed by concerns with social ecology, radical feminism and Christian witness groups like George Lakey’s Movement for a New Society (Polletta 2002, 195-196; Graeber 2009, 235; Sturgeon 1995, 1997, 33). Several Clamshell veterans were in fact involved in DAN-NYC at its very earliest stages (Polletta, 2001, 27).

not only the stated intentions of the protestors themselves, but also the violent and repeated efforts of state forces to stop these actions in their tracks (cf. Graeber 2015, 56-60). The obvious display of force shows that the state recognizes the threat to existing hierarchies posed by protesters.

Likewise, following Bourdieu's analysis of post-'60's counterculture we could conceive of DAN-NYC's actions as a radical "reconversion" strategy on the part of alienated factions of the middle class, frustrated by their class positions amid turbulent economic circumstances (cf. Bourdieu 2010, 119, 125, 150-164). DAN's unorthodox social protests could thus be read as "ostentatious" forms of political distinction, according to which direct action members "contest one culture in the name of another" by struggling to legitimize their own practices and dispositions as valuable forms of social and cultural capital (ibid., 248, 152). Again, this would demand a very cynical reading of DAN's aim to "pursue decentralization, direct democracy, and local autonomy"—not to mention its members' own stated motivations for participating in direct action. Wood, for instance, quotes an antipoverty activist who admits that

because of [the 1999 Seattle protests] I got involved in DAN...I met some good people. I think that there was more coalition building just in general, in the United States and in New York City after Seattle. I think [one of the] big things in the United States that changed was...a more widespread belief in fighting battles to win, not just for the symbolic ability to say that we did something. (quoted in Wood 2012, 44; cf. Polletta 2001, 30)

Direct Action as a form of Countercultural Distinction?

Yet as *Distinction* argues repeatedly, a social agent's stated intentions and beliefs are not necessarily a reliable indicator of the political stances they actually embody. Countercultural groups, according to Bourdieu, regularly insist that they cannot be defined according to traditional class categories, while objectively their behaviour speaks constantly "of classification—but in a mode of denial" (2010, 370). As I hope to have demonstrated in the last chapter, anarchists are far more trusting that political actors can articulate their own interests and account for their own motivations. The basis of this trust however, is not a naïve belief in the inherent goodness or intelligence of human nature, but a recognition that the experience of democratic, non-coercive social relationships are themselves a means for actualizing our political potential. The "discourses of opposition" distilled in DAN's charter and principles of unity were not authoritative political positions handed down by a clique of intellectual leaders, in the manner of traditional party politics studied by Bourdieu (cf. 2010, 400, 415, 424). Instead the network's ideological commitment to direct democracy was self-consciously enacted in the formal practices of consensus-building and social cooperation that gave rise to its direct actions (Graeber 2002, 70; Polletta 2001, 27; cf. Sturgeon 1995, 43). The environment created by these practices evinced a commitment to a genealogical critique of political representation advocated by Jun, Franks, Cohn and May in the last chapter. By stark contrast with the analytical reflexivity pursued by Bourdieu, the genealogical awareness afforded by DAN-NYC's consensus process was generated by political actors themselves, and conditioned by the unique social dynamics and experiences of the group.

As we shall see, this commitment did not prevent social hierarchies from reasserting themselves. Yet the constant and very critical attention paid to the relationship between DAN-NYC's practices and its anti-hierarchical stance made it nearly impossible for any one social group to a) legitimize its own tastes and dispositions; and then b) secure recognition of that legitimacy from other DAN members (cf. Bourdieu 2010, 482).

The Anarchism of DAN's Political Structure

To begin with, the larger DAN had no power to actually enforce any particular political stance (or “system of classificatory schemes,” to borrow Bourdieu's phrase; *ibid*). Large-scale demonstrations, such as the one organized against the 2001 Summit of the Americas in Québec, were coordinated by countless affinity groups and other networks of mobilization from all across Canada and the United States (Graeber 2009, 288-289, 145-199; cf. Sturgeon 1995, 38-39). As with the spontaneous, “bottom-up” federations envisioned by Bakunin in the last chapter, each of these small units—typically ranging from five to fifteen people—retained full control of the extent and the nature of their involvement in direct actions, and self-organized according to any number of social indicators or qualities (Graeber 2009, 318; cf. Polletta 2002, 192-193).³¹ Two affinity groups identified by Graeber, the “Flying Squirrels for Freedom” and “Subway

³¹Although part of the purpose of affinity groups is surely to forge a meaningful collective identity, it does not necessarily follow that individual members were pre-selected or excluded based on shared identity markers such as race or class. As Polletta recounts, many DAN-NYC members in fact saw affinity groups as an opportunity to “go outside [one's] comfort zone” by joining people with different backgrounds: “Affinity as a bond is different both from friendship in its explicitly political character and from shared ideological purpose in its recognition that ‘identities’—vegan, lesbian, Latina—are as much the basis of political commitments as are more traditional political creeds” (2002, 192; cf. Sturgeon 1995, 38-42).

Liberation Front,”³² mainly existed as informal friend networks between actions, while another, “Harpers’ Ferry,” was forged in the New York chapter of the IWW (ibid, 289; cf. Sturgeon 1995, 40-41).³³ While the mandate of DAN-NYC was unclear on its own relationship to these various affinity groups and collectives, the idea was for the network to facilitate the coordination of larger direct actions, either by developing “a permanent spokescouncil for existing...groups” or by holding “meetings open to everyone, and [organizing] its own working groups” (Graeber 2009, 289-90). Gradually, autonomous bodies such as the “Labour Solidarity Working Group” and “Police & Prisons” were established, and evolved into something like affinity groups of their own (ibid, 298; cf. Polletta 2002, 192).

Importantly, however, no group—whatever its origins—was entrusted with representing the common interests or political stance of the larger network: direct actions were instead coordinated horizontally by means of an intricate process of consensus-building. At weekly meetings, spokespersons (or “spokes”) would relay information from various affinity groups and collectives to DAN’s general meetings, and even submit proposals for future actions (Graeber 2009, 289). As Polletta observed, two or three DAN members facilitated this dialogue using “a formal queue of participants and a variety of mechanisms for registering agreement and dissent” (2002, 176). In the lead up to larger actions, such as those in Philadelphia or Washington, DAN meetings resembled something closer to full-blown spokescouncils, in which “empowered spokes” sat in a

³²As Sturgeon has documented, “affinity groups...often name themselves with an ironic, humorous flair...[These] names express an aspect of a common identity among members of the group” but also “a certain distancing from the act of association involved in joining an affinity group. The moment of humor is also the moment of theory, the ironic distance of participant observation” (1995, 39).

³³Many DAN members were also drawn from larger collectives, such as the anarchist-leaning Food Not Bombs and ACT UP, an affiliation of radical AIDS activists (Polletta 2002, 189; cf. Graeber 2009; 296).

large circle and carried on a discussion, while the groups they represented sat further out, conferring with one another about the goings on (Graeber 2009, 289; cf. Starhawk 2011, 29).

By contrast with the liberal tradition of elected representatives, spokes in direct action culture are usually distinguished by their conspicuous lack of power: they are not even allowed to make decisions without first consulting the larger group, and the role is regularly swapped between different members (Starhawk 2011, *ibid*; Sturgeon 1995, 40). The very aim of this facilitation is consciously non-competitive and pragmatic: as one of DAN's own handouts explained, "consensus doesn't mean that everyone thinks that the decision made is the best one possible, but that everyone feels that their viewpoint was heard and synthesized into the proposal" (quoted in Polletta 2002, 192). DAN facilitators, as Polletta observed, also departed dramatically from liberal and legalistic traditions of supposedly impartial arbitration, having

reject[ed] conceptions of equality that require people to be treated identically.

Such conceptions embed white, masculinist, middle-class norms, [DAN members] argue: far from neutral standards, they are already intrinsically biased.

To begin to overturn such standards and the broader structures that those standards reproduce, DAN activists put groups that have been disadvantaged first. They "stack" people's interventions so that women speak more, and they try to make sure that when the media seek out spokespeople it is someone of color who speaks first. (Polletta 2002, 191; cf. Graeber 2009, 110)

Bourdieu's Relevance to DAN-NYC

It bears repeating that none of these measures resolve the problem of social hierarchy identified in *Distinction*. Subtle and not-so-subtle divisions along race, gender and class lines, communication breakdowns, perceived inequalities, discriminatory language—all of these were ever-present, simmering issues at DAN-NYC meetings and events (Polletta 2001, 29-30; Graeber 2009, 240-241, 294-300; Wood 2012, 101). Graeber describes many instances in which working-class and non-white activists criticized so-called “activist culture,” characterized by

styles of dress, mannerisms, ways of talking, tastes in music and food—a kind of hybrid mishmash of hippie, punk, and mainstream middle-class white culture, with incorporated chunks of more exotic revolutionary traditions—[that] made it almost impossible for them to communicate with anyone outside their own little charmed circle. (Graeber 2009, 239-240)

From one angle, this critique vindicates Bourdieu's indictment of “free-floating Utopian thinkers” who fail to recognize their own “perverse relation to the social world” (2010, 474). In this case, white, middle-class activists had constituted their political stances and cultural tastes as a “subversive point of honour” within the DAN community (cf. *ibid*). To engage in direct action in the first place spoke to a certain racial privilege, as was made clear when other New York groups like the “Anarchist People of Color” network (APOC) tried to organize actions, and “faced completely different levels of police repression” and violence than their (predominately white) DAN-NYC counterparts (Graeber 2009, 243; cf. Democracy Now 2003). As one African-American anarchist

purportedly remarked to Graeber, gesturing towards a group of punks at a demonstration, “if I went out on the street looking like that I’d be dragged down to the cop shop in fifteen minutes” (2009, 240).

Polletta, meanwhile, suggests that the time and energy DAN-NYC members needed to expend on complex and exhaustive meetings positioned it well beyond working-class sensibilities and resources.³⁴ Low-income “[r]esidents with child care and work responsibilities” for instance, generally have “less time for [the] long, explanatory conversations” needed to coordinate direct actions along anarchist lines than, say, DAN’s core membership of younger, post-college grads (Polletta 2002, 216).³⁵ While it might be argued that DAN-NYC groups merely chose to allot more time and energy to revolutionary organizing, Bourdieu reminds us that such choices presuppose a certain “distance from necessity”—the economic basis of which is never recognized according to the social logic of distinction (2010, 47).

Consider, in this light, DAN member (and critical sociologist) Lesley Wood’s argument against Polletta that “even an action that fails is OK if it was agreed to

³⁴ Polletta, it should be said, makes a detailed comparison between DAN-NYC and Communities Organized for Public Service (COPS), a Texas-based offshoot of Saul Alinsky’s Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF). Although both DAN and COPS “emphasize democratic participation,” COPS is based in church-based organizing and involves a very different class and cultural ethos, one that emphasizes political results, time efficiency and the professional facilitation of marginalized community groups. While Polletta admits that “faith-based organizers sometimes risk treating consensus as a process of brokering commonalities from fixed interests,” she also suggests that DAN-NYC’s own, “distinctively process-oriented and personalistic culture of activism” depend “on the bonds that come from shared participation in that culture” (2002, 200, 178). Cf. 176-201.

³⁵ Graeber, however, rightly cautions against over-generalizing about the supposed economic privilege of DAN activists. His own ethnography of DAN-NYC suggests that while members were “disproportionally likely to have attended college,” they had yet to transition into “regular, career-oriented nine-to-five jobs or child-rearing households” (2009, 247). Moreover, large minorities hadn’t received any secondary education at all, and many members hailed from New York’s squatter scene, or had personal histories as “runaways or living lives of voluntarily homelessness, moving from city to city” (2009, 248-252). And while admitting that a majority of members was white, his ethnography suggests the network was by no means racially homogenous (ibid). Cf. Polletta 2002, 194; 2001, 28-29.

consensually... Discussing what happened becomes part of the group process and builds solidarity” (Polletta 2002, 194). From the standpoint of prefigurative philosophy this is a reasonable stance because it recognizes that political experimentation and the cultivation of democratic values are crucial to developing “a new society in the shell of the old” (Suisa 2011, 73-74). Such disinterest in the functional outcome of political struggle, however, might not be feasible for activists from materially-deprived backgrounds; Polletta also observed that many activists “who had been...long deprived of formal political standing often wanted formal titles in their own organizations” rather than strict egalitarianism (2012, 216). It is easy to conceive of a scenario in which DAN members misrecognized the socio-economic basis of these differences in political disposition, and subconsciously interpreted their own unique interest in consensus-building as a sign of “personal uniqueness” (Bourdieu 2010, 158). Hence, Polletta cautions that where DAN activists “might see participatory democracy as a means to overcome traditional inequalities, they may be hampered by differences in ‘taste’ for organization styles that line up with differences in status” (2002, 216).

Opportunities for Dissensus in DAN-NYC

Taken together, Polletta and Graeber’s analysis of DAN-NYC’s cultural dynamics suggest that some of the anti-hierarchical practices of its direct action culture inadvertently reproduced the hierarchical social logic identified in *Distinction*. On its own, the network’s intensive consensus-building process would seem to embody something very close to anarchism’s ideals, in which autonomous groups self-organize

according to anti-hierarchical principles and in so doing prefigure a more democratic society (cf. May 1994, 55; Jun 2012, 130-133). The problem, as Bourdieu anticipated, is that DAN-NYC's time-intensive and risky protests presupposed certain privileges and dispositions reflective of a socially dominant position (cf. Graeber 2009, 245-247, 333). To participate in a "radically democratic" spokescouncil, or face off against the New York Police Department during a WTO protest, affinity groups had to already possess a certain amount of social and economic capital—a fact that was undoubtedly "misrecognized" on many occasions as a function of their membership's political distinction.

The saving grace of DAN-NYC, however, was that members were attentive to their own organizational practices, and how these practices contrasted with an ideal of anti-hierarchical democracy. This commitment to genealogical critique all but guaranteed that the implicit distinction afforded to specific members could not be consolidated into new forms of symbolic violence. Recall that in Bourdieu's eyes, cultural games of distinction reinforce social domination because elites are able to universalize their own definition of what is and is not culturally legitimate (2010, 20, 470-471). De-facto leaders within DAN who hailed from more privileged backgrounds, by contrast, were not "mandated by the group with producing legitimate classifications" (even if they subconsciously might have wished to), since the network's organizational structure ensured that individual affinity groups retained control of their own political representation (ibid., 20).

To the contrary, the difficult and fractious debates that occurred in the group as they worked towards consensus in fact manifested the type of political dissensus

articulated by Rançière and May in the last chapter. This is not to say that the political faultlines and controversies arising in the event of dissensus could then be resolved by DAN's own facilitation of dialogue and cooperation. For instance, an important alliance between DAN-NYC and the Student Liberation Action Movement (SLAM), a far more racially diverse group based in Hunter College, broke down during the planning stages of an action against the 2000 Republican Convention in Philadelphia (Graeber 2009, 242; Polletta 2001, 29). In this case, dissensus was not confined to matters of tactics or strategy, but instead centred on the shared motivation for protesting in the first place. When SLAM joined with certain DAN-NYC factions to suggest that the action should address racial oppression and America's "prison-industrial complex," they met opposition from other, mostly white factions of DAN, who wanted to highlight issues related to globalization and international trade (ibid). As activist Brooke Lehman recounted to Polletta, the problem was that

these white activists were essentially saying that focusing on racial oppression and prisons issues was a narrow focus. And globalization was a broad focus. And a lot of people were saying, how can you say racial oppression is a narrow focus when it's at the core of almost all oppressive systems. (quoted. in Polletta 2001, 29)

Unsurprisingly the alliance was eventually scuttled, but "the resulting recriminations," in Graeber's view, "caused quite a number of activists to give up on DAN entirely" (242-243).

Another significant controversy erupted when DAN member Miriam Bearse attempted to win approval for a third facilitator (known as a "vibes watcher") who would

monitor the participation and emotional signals of underrepresented groups at general meetings (Polletta 2002, 176). This grew directly out of a widely perceived problem of gender inequality: women spoke far less often and, in Graeber's words, "had come to see [DAN-NYC's] larger meetings as meaningless forums dominated by men who liked to hear themselves speak" (2009, 336). However, in trying to gain consensus for Bearse's idea, disagreements surfaced that evidenced wildly different political sensibilities. Repeated attempts were made to postpone a decision until some future meeting, or push the debate onto the network's online listserv forum. These proposals garnered this response from a female African-American activist identified only as Zosera:

I can't fail but notice that those who have been the most vocal in opposing this idea...I don't think it's an accident that they've all been white men. Maybe they don't see the point because *they* rarely feel marginalized; *they* always feel empowered to speak...The measure of our success is the kind of climate we create and, if DAN creates a climate that denies parity, then DAN itself becomes a form of oppression. (quoted in Graeber 2009, 344)

An increasingly contentious debate among various factions of the membership ensued, and Bearse's initial proposal was tabled. Yet for Jack Griffin, a union organizer who was also attending the meeting, the damage had already been done:

I'm here to speak on behalf of four thousand union folks, who work for twenty-seven different companies...Most of them are immigrants. These are people who have to handle shit and blood all fuckin' day... I'll come back here with the president of the local there, who can tell you about a series of actions we're hoping will ultimately lead to a general strike among laundry workers in

November... Maybe our membership should meet with y'all, as perhaps there's a bit of a divergence in your respective experiences. I think most of the discussion I've been hearing this afternoon is very classist; I don't understand half the words you're using! (quoted in Graeber 2009, 348)

This dialogue is worth quoting at length because it illustrates the different levels at which dissensus can occur, as well as the very different languages political actors can use to express political opinions. Both speakers criticize the debate for implicitly reproducing social hierarchies, but from very different standpoints, and with very different ideas of social domination in mind. Zosera suggests that opposition to Bearer's proposal reflects a failure on the part of white male activists to recognize their own social privilege; Griffin, on the other hand, takes issue with the class privilege implicit in the abstract and intellectualized nature of debate—what working-class activists described to Polletta as “armchair activism for the middle class” (2002, 178). Here is genealogical critique in action: both political actors expose the framework of social domination that underlies even the most radical attempts at anti-oppressive action. The exchange grants social actors a new reflexivity in negotiating their common project, a new sensitivity to the ways in which race and class inequalities were expressed in language and political dispositions. Since these same inequalities regularly imperiled the solidarity and cooperation necessary for DAN-NYC's political work, an intimate and continual reflection on their relationship to specific social dynamics could mean the difference between the success and failure of prefigurative action.

The Power of Dissensus

In Bourdieu's terms, it might be said that DAN's consensus process enabled both speakers to "modify the schemes of perception" governing political communication, so that "other properties, previously unnoticed or relegated to the background" could emerge (2010, 482). Having robbed inequality of its doxa, political participants such as Zosera and Griffin exposed "the internalized limits" of political distinction so that "hierarchy [lost] its natural, symbolic, common-sense nature" (ibid). From the perspective of anarchists like Franks or May, Griffin and Zosera enacted a "process of immanent critique" fully in line with the ideals of prefiguration, since the "medium of communication" it forged theoretically allowed for new, egalitarian "practices and social relations" to take the place of old, hierarchical ones (Franks 2006, 99; May 1994, 133).

Nonetheless, debate and dissensus are uphill battles. Individual members of DAN almost certainly gained new insights into their own political genealogy, but the larger network still fell short of the anarchist ideal of a prefigurative social entity. Similar to the conflict with SLAM, the perceived elitism of DAN-NYC ultimately dissuaded Griffin's union from forging an alliance (Graeber 2009, 349; Polletta 2001, 29). Later controversies over DAN's commitment to and definition of non-violence were even more explosive, and the fallout among its membership and allies undoubtedly hastened the network's dissolution in late 2002 (Graeber 2009, 299-300; Wood 2012, 45, 97).³⁶ When DAN-NYC coalitions break down over fundamental differences in political stance and

³⁶ Most damaging were disagreements over anarchists' use of Black Bloc tactics, which defined non-violence in such a way that certain acts of corporate property destruction were considered permissible (Graeber 2009, 224). As both Graeber and Wood make clear, tensions over the "diversity of tactics" used in direct actions actually predated the establishment of continental DAN, but were greatly exacerbated by the political shifts that accompanied the 9/11 attacks. (Ibid, 295; Wood 2012, 92-112)

cultural disposition, when allies cannot even agree on the purpose of direct action—does this really speak to a democratization of political decision-making, a radical dissensus that can overthrow existing hierarchical distinctions? Or does it only signify communication breakdown and a failure to organize effectively?

The True Legacy of DAN-NYC

If DAN-NYC’s activism had achieved nothing by way of significant social change but instead merely facilitated political squabbling among tiny leftist collectives, there would be good reason to dismiss the entire project as a short-lived game of cultural distinction. Participation in direct action circles would have simply afforded already-dominant groups—those with enough economic freedom and familiarity with radical Leftist discourse—a chance to become the “specialists in freedom” criticized by Franks in chapter two. The “revolutionary dispositions” of this countercultural vanguard would conceal “the conservative dispositions betray[ed] in the order of ethics” (Bourdieu 2010, 424)

In fact, DAN-NYC’s political achievements were impressive. Several authors, Graeber included, argue that the network’s contribution to large-scale direct actions, in Quebec and Philadelphia for example, revealed to the broader North American public the anti-democratic nature of powerful institutions like the WTO or World Bank; this in turn forced a massive de-escalation of predatory debt programs and trade policies around the world (Graeber 2013, 108, Chomsky 2000, Engler 2007). DAN-NYC was able to provide crucial support to local unions during direct actions, first by organizing working groups

to help develop an effective political strategy, but also by occasionally conducting secondary pickets and boycotts—activities that American labour groups are themselves legally barred from organizing (Graeber 2009, 373-374). As Wood observes, the network’s “working groups on police brutality, labor issues, and genetic engineering [also] represented DAN-NYC...at police brutality, environment, anti-sweatshop, and immigrant rights demonstrations,” as well as at protests concerning community gardens and public space (2012, 44).

For our purposes, what is perhaps most important is the network’s demonstrable success in cooperating with groups that did *not* embody a commitment to anarchist-style prefiguration. Some groups with traditional political hierarchies, such as the Trotskyist International Socialist Organization (ISO), were able to make use of DAN-NYC’s consensus-based process,³⁷ and others engaged directly with working groups, such as “Police & Prisons,” which provided resources and personnel to local communities fighting police brutality or wrongful imprisonment (Graeber 2009, 298). As Polletta observed, when less-egalitarian collectives demonstrated interest

in joining [DAN-NYC] in an action, say, a demonstration against sweatshops, [DAN] would be more than happy to collaborate. [This] comes from a certain humility—who are they to define the one true way?—and a willingness to question their own principles (2002, 189).

Despite the struggles of dissensus and the tensions that are brought to the surface through

³⁷ This is not to downplay the tensions and cultural conflicts that arose within these coalitions. The ISO, in particular, was known to periodically sabotage consensus-based meetings, apparently to demonstrate the inefficiency of egalitarian organizing (Graeber 2009, 312-313, 27-28). As well, coalitions between DAN-NYC and traditional NGOs and unions became infinitely more difficult after 9/11, due to the changed political atmosphere (ibid, xvi-xvii, 239, 368; Wood 2012, 109-110).

genealogical critique, the network's members found political success and pedagogical opportunity in the work they accomplished.

Although the Direct Action Network only survived a scant three years, its consensus process was so influential that, in Graeber's words, even after "DAN as a formal entity was gone...some version of its model of organization had become pretty much universal" among New York activists committed to direct action (2009, 290). For leftist groups organized according to traditional, hierarchical principles, this would probably not seem like a significant victory. Political disintegration would necessarily mean a certain loss of power, both in coordinating social struggles and representing a coherent political stance (or in Bourdieu's words, "the capacity to produce discourse about the social world"; 2010, 398). Because DAN-NYC never coopted any power from its autonomous affinity groups and collectives, the dissolution of the larger network signaled only a loss of the representational conceit of the network's political unity.

Meanwhile, much of its repertoire of formal consensus-building practices—embodied, for instance, in "stacked" facilitation of dialogue, organization of non-hierarchical working groups, hand gestures such as "twinkling" to visually convey dis/agreement—were quickly adopted (and adapted) by local groups such as APOC, and later imported wholesale into the Occupy Wall Street movement of 2011-2012 (Graeber 2009, 290, 243, 2012, 49, Marcus 2012, Feldman 2011).³⁸

The vibrant Occupy movement reacquainted the public with a range of anarchist ideas, including prefiguration. Perhaps more now than ever before, neoliberalism in the West is challenged by political opposition committed to overcoming social inequality.

³⁸ Graeber himself, as well as several other DAN-NYC veterans, played an instrumental role in shaping the initial Occupy protests at Zuccotti Park, and later wrote about the experience in *The Democracy Project*.

Concurrently, countercultural discourses and campaigns continue to impact popular perceptions of politics and political participation. The narrative of the counterculture is so pervasive that there are efforts on the part of the cultural and economic elites to reframe their own dominance as a dissident, countercultural stance.³⁹ Likewise, the power of consumer culture to absorb subversive identities and energies has never been stronger.

³⁹ In a recent review of Adam Grant's *Originals*, author Thomas Frank highlights the absurdity of Grant's effort to recast "the struggles of an executive at the CIA ... to put more information on its 'classified internet' presumably so its agents can go about spying, subverting, and droning with more efficiency than before ... as... 'countercultural'" (2016).

Conclusion

There can be no natural starting point or preordained set of intellectual or practical coordinates for practicing anarchist prefiguration. The process is fluid and demands a host of dialectical relationships: between present and future socio-political states; between present and future conceptions of one's own political genealogy; between the ends and means of the given political project; and between action and deliberation. And this list is not complete, for the project of prefiguration is itself never complete, and always subject to the specifics of a given social reality.

If it is true that an anarchist practice of prefiguration is not dependent on one fixed set of analytical coordinates, it means that Bourdieu's insights into the logic of social domination cannot be a prerequisite for overcoming existing inequalities. That being said, there is much in Bourdieu's work that rewards those who wish to understand the real relationship between their self-representation as political agents and their politics. As he makes clear, political actors continuously delude themselves into thinking their countercultural self-representation places them outside the boundaries of the social hierarchy. Bourdieu guides us to recognize the real basis of social and cultural capital: a freedom from economic necessity that allows for the cultivation of "higher" tastes and dispositions. He also challenges those who are of a higher class to reckon with the arbitrariness of their own distinction and to begin the work of accepting the equality of so-called inferior stances. Yet we can only follow Bourdieu's prescription so far: the desire for an objective, analytical understanding of these social dynamics led him to a misguided and elitist political project. The universal values that "reflexive sociology" supposedly guarantees are never subject to democratic scrutiny and

implicitly marginalize already-dominated classes.

I have proposed the anarchist tool of prefigurative politics as an antidote to such intellectual elitism. As mentioned above, prefiguration is not a superior set of intellectual presuppositions; instead, it is an accessible, concrete and collective practice. It trusts that all political subjects are already capable of creating conditions in which they interrogate their own forms of knowledge, democratically. Through this process, they can revolutionize hierarchical social relationships, and also define for themselves the terms by which knowledge will be interrogated. Prefiguration also does not depend on a shared viewpoint or sensibility. In fact, it invites differently classed social actors to interrogate the genealogy of their collective and individual political projects. In stark contrast to Bourdieu, the goal is not an idealized objective perspective on political relationships. Rather, the aim is to affirm different-but-equal political identities through concrete acts of social cooperation and democratic practice.

Prefigurative action cultivates dissensus, a messy and difficult reckoning with opinions and stances that people have been conditioned to treat unequally. This process upends the experience of traditional hierarchical decision making, in which opinions and stances are classed and then valued according to these arbitrary class distinctions. In the case of NYC-DAN, prefiguration took the form of consensus-building between decentralized affinity groups and activist collectives. Although the dissensus introduced into the group by non-white, lower-class and non-male participants often impeded the smooth functioning of the revolutionary network, it was the dialogue introduced into the group by this dissensus that offered true revolutionary potential. The dissensus exposed each member to the hidden, misrecognized basis of their own political stance, and not according to the dictates of a

fictional, objective observer. Rather, the genealogical critique was stimulated by members' dialogue and interaction with each other, thus creating an intellectual climate of critical interrogation far more consistently egalitarian.

In light of Bourdieu's analysis of class distinctions and the instances of dissensus in DAN-NYC described above, it is clear that reckoning with the true basis of unequal social relationships requires humility and a commitment to learning. Political actors must in fact relearn their own social instincts. As *Distinction's* analysis has shown, these instincts encompass both the overt and subconscious forms of communication, and all facets of taste and social relations. This act of learning is central to the dialectical movement between the present moment in which we hope to escape the hierarchical logic of distinction and the future in which we are cultivating a new equality with others.

There is, as we have seen, no guarantee that people will overcome the limits of their own social conditioning under capitalist hierarchy. Even when political actors committed to equality undertake a revolutionary project, the open-endedness of prefiguration allows for the possibility that influential members can legitimize certain discourses as superior to others. As well, if a group is not attentive to the social conditions that give rise to their own activity, the very gestures of dissent they undertake can implicitly become forms of countercultural capital within the group. Nonetheless, anarchistic social relationships are the ideal breeding ground for the hard work of genealogical critique. The absence of normal, codified hierarchies and of political representatives affords political actors the freedom and responsibility to learn of the many experiences of hierarchy they have never been forced to recognize. As in the case of DAN, this learning can appear ancillary to the task of direct action, but it is in fact at its core.

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