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Bourdieu, rational action and the time-space strategy of gentrification

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This paper proposes gentrification as an example of class habitus adjusting to a new field via a time-space strategy that involves conscious rational coordination of class agents on a new aesthetic 'focal point'. This approach suggests: (1) a much greater role for conscious rational processes in both the intentional and intuitive processes of class reproduction; (2) an understanding via gentrification of the symbolic significance of time-space in class processes; (3) the significance of individual class agents in the process of gentrification; (4) a view of gentrification that gives greater prominence to working-class taste and habitus.

key words habitus gentrification intentionality rational action time-space-strategies

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Introduction

It is now a well-rehearsed fact that the origins and motive force of gentrification have been hotly disputed in the literature. On the one hand Smith (Smith 1979, 1987, 1992, 1996) points to the importance of the capital accumulation process through the urban land market. With the de-industrialization of the urban core came the devalorization of inner urban land and a widening gap between the potential value of this land (given its central location) and its actual value. This rent gap is closed by, amongst other things, the creation of a market for gentrifiable housing. The explanation of gentrification is more to do with the 'movement of capital rather than people' (Smith 1979). On the other hand Ley (1980, 1986, 1994, 1996) has signalled the importance of cultural and lifestyle values of a new middle class with liberal political orientations who value the historic preservation of the urban core and the consumption of non-standardized commodities. Employment in tertiary sector or 'post-industrial occupations' and having a university degree are the key indicators of gentrification for Ley and are expressed in post-modern lifestyles of self-conscious consumption. Hamnett (1994, 1996, 2000) is sceptical of the scope of the rent gap explanation but emphasizes the significance of post-industrial service jobs located in the central city as a strong material force for gentrification. The simple growth of this type of employment in enterprises requiring accessibility to the central city is bound to have an effect on the social composition and consumption outlets in the central areas of the city. Elsewhere the increasing feminization of the professional workforce and the rise of both single and dual high income households requiring accessibility to the central city, are seen as significant (Bondi 1991, 1999; Lyons 1996). In contrast there is some evidence of the emergence of female-headed lone-parent 'marginal gentrifier' households requiring an inner urban location to manage the range of responsibilities that are so hard to meet in the homogeneous suburbs (Rose 1984). More recently a structural explanation has been re-asserted in the form of the falling real cost of domestic technologies which enable houses to be renovated in certain ways (Redfern 1997a b). These tensions between structure vs. agency in explanations of gentrification are

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reproduced in other spheres – between economy and culture (Lees 1994; Zukin 1982); production and consumption; modernity and postmodernity (Mills 1988; Lees 1996) class and gender (Rose 1984; Lyons 1996; Bondi 1991, 1998; Warde 1991; Butler and Hamnett 1994).

The changing relative values of inner urban land and built form are undeniably important in explaining gentrification. So too is the increasing numerical importance of quaternary sector jobs in the post-industrial urban labour market. So too for that matter are the pro-urban lifestyle characteristics associated with the historical ambiance of the central city, and a more bohemian lifestyle set against the assumed conformity of the suburbs. What is not so clear – assuming the rent gap and the growing 'new' middle class of professional workers, even given the possible pro-urbanism of sections of that class – is just how gentrification got established. Given these undeniably necessary conditions just how did gentrification take off in what were for those middle-class gentrifiers conditions of considerable social and economic uncertainty in the working class inner areas.[1]

One set of explanations for the actions of the early gentrifiers draws on the work of Pierre Bourdieu. Certain references have been made in the gentrification literature to the relationship between material and cultural capital (especially Jager 1986; Bridge 2001). Early gentrifiers are seen as having large amounts of cultural capital even if their stores of material capital are small. Cultural capital is deployed in lieu of material capital to achieve distinction. The cultural capital used in the case of gentrification is the set of values that privileges pro-urban lifestyles. The gentrified neighbourhood has been seen as the spatial manifestation of the new middle-class habitus (Podmore 1998). According to these accounts gentrification is seen as a strategy of distinction for an emerging new middle class. Gentrification began when small groups of educated but lower paid public-sector professionals sought to distinguish themselves from the conventional middle class in the suburbs. Lacking sufficient economic capital to outshine them through conspicuous consumption this group deployed their considerable cultural capital to create a distinctive lifestyle through the renovation of older houses in the central city. As the process has matured the lifestyle cache of the gentrified neighbourhood has caught on and attracted members of the professional middle-class in private sector occupations and possessing more economic than cultural capital. These groups are often associated with more commodified forms of gentrification, particularly through corporate sponsored conversion of industrial sites into luxury residential spaces on the waterfronts and symbolic sites of many western cities. This development of habitus as a socio-cultural milieu in distinct neighbourhoods has been outlined more recently in terms of Zukin's (1982) prior work on 'loft living' (Podmore 1998).

Bourdieu's form of class analysis has had increasing influence in social theory over the last 20 years. His notion of the unconscious transmission of class dispositions via bodily movement and other intuitive responses to situations seems to capture many elements of class reproduction (Bourdieu 1977, 1984, 1990, 1998). Using this approach gentrification would be seen as largely unconscious response to the new field of possibilities in the relationships between cultural and economic capital in social space. These are opened up by the changing economic conditions (including the devalorization of inner urban land and the investment opportunities that affords along with the growth in the service class of professional workers). Gentrification is an outcome of the repertoire of responses to these new economic and social opportunities that arise from prior dispositions of the class habitus.

The limited number of adaptions of Bourdieu's ideas in the gentrification literature, and indeed human geography in general (for a recent review see Painter 2000), tend to treat 'habitus' uncritically. It seems to capture the socio-cultural milieu of the new middle class and their distinction, both in terms of the types of neighbourhoods they move to in the central city and the aesthetic tastes displayed in these locations.

Yet gentrification as a form of habitus presents us with a conundrum and one that goes to the heart of Bourdieu's class analysis as well as our explanations of gentrification. Habitus is largely about the structuring structures that make sure classes are reproduced securely over time. It is about classifiable practices as well as their classification. But gentrification seems to represent new practices and orders of classification. If the different tastes that lead to, say, inner urban loft living, rather than suburban housing, are merely small perturbations within the overall middle-class habitus, then why

all the fuss about gentrification? Why is gentrification held up to be symptomatic of the cultural practices of a *new* middle class? If gentrification is minor variation in the reproduction of the middle class then why did it happen at all, given the fact that in terms of the existing tastes of the middle class (i.e. the existing habitus) the inner urban areas to which early gentrifiers might move were seen as inherently risky. The difficulties that these questions raise suggest why most of the discussion of gentrification and habitus tends to relate to areas where gentrification is well advanced or, if it is in the early stages, research is focused on areas that are in some senses 'soft', or more secure, for habitus adaption (artist districts in Manhattan is the classic example – Zukin 1982).

Some of the ambiguities around habitus and gentrification have been identified recently by Wynne and O'Connor (1998). They point to a much more middle-brow culture to the gentrification of inner Manchester, in contrast to the claims for elite distinction of gentrifiers in the literature. Some of these changes can be accounted for by contrasts in tastes between 1960s France and 1990s Britain and indeed the increasing permeability of tastes across classes (especially in relation to popular music). Wynne and O'Connor rightly suggest that Bourdieu's account of habitus is poorly equipped to deal with such changes. The reason for its lack of adaptability, I suggest, is the same as the one that makes a conundrum out of the relationship between gentrification and habitus in general: Bourdieu's oversocialized conception of human action.

The bind that habitus leaves us in is a result of the fact that Bourdieu has a passive view of human agency and presents human action as *over*-socialized. In this paper I go on to explore the relationships between Bourdieu's ideas of practice and habitus with the emergence of gentrification as visible social force to argue that conscious rational action can play a more significant role in both Bourdieu's class analysis and our understanding of gentrification.

Habitus, practice and field

Habitus is an array of inherited dispositions that condition bodily movement, tastes and judgements according to class position (Bourdieu 1984). There are also strategies of action in everyday life that operate on practical reasoning or 'the feel for the game' (Bohman 1999). The logic of practice is an interplay of culturally given dispositions, interests and ways of proceeding. Practical reason operates through practices themselves rather than any prior conscious thought that might choose the action. These practices, such as bodily appearance and movement, operate according to rules that are constitutive – that confer identity – rather than regulative. Using Wittgenstein's (1953) understanding of the rules of the game as constitutive of action rather than simply regulative Taylor (1993) emphasizes the point that the most profound rules lie beyond rationalization. For example we might conventionally follow the arrow symbol in the direction of flight of the arrow but if someone saw the shape reversed as the symbol for a ray gun with the feathers of the arrow representing the emissions from the gun then they might understand our explanation to 'follow the arrow' and walk in the wrong direction. There is a limit to how far we can go in the everyday explanation of our rules without communication becoming overloaded. It is undoubtedly true that certain rules seem to be hard-wired, or form part of an irreducible background to action. They exist beyond rationalization and are largely unconscious. Bourdieu's notion of habitus is exactly this unarticulated background to action.

The habitus is individually embodied and a shared body of dispositions – a form of collective history (Jenkins 1992). It provides the background dispositions and practical (but unconscious) reason in its everyday reproduction. In the case of the new middle-class gentrifiers, habitus is characterized by distinction in neighbourhoods, housing, lifestyle and consumption. The motive force that reproduces the habitus in this case is the drive to maintain distinction in the struggles over status in social space. Distinction is conferred by the ability to define and possess rare goods such as taste and discernment.

Honneth (1986) has argued that this principle rests on instrumental criteria of utility maximization. Different groups seek to maximize their utility in the narrow field of the economy as well as in the more general economy of practices that includes symbolic forms. Groups seek to maximize their possession of rare symbolic forms for the least economic expenditure. However as Honneth points out, in order to avoid having to assume that acting subjects possess the actual intention

of utility maximizers, Bourdieu argues for a positionally-based utility calculus. This social utility calculus is 'manifest in their collective perceptual and evaluative schema on an unconscious level' (Honneth 1986, 57). As he argues this:

> Allows Bourdieu to claim that, even if they subjectively orient their actions in other ways, social subjects act from the economic view of utility which has been deposited in the modes of orientation, classificatory schemes and dispositions binding to their groups (57).

The key point of this is that 'The subjectively conscious plan of action therefore does not have to coincide with the habitually intended aim of action, which is in principle determined by utility maximization' (57).
He continues:

> . . . the forms of life and taste dispositions which different groups, at any given time, pass on through cultural socialization have a purely instrumental function. They so adapt individual group members to their specific class situation that these individuals, as a result of their valuations and judgements of taste, carry out the appropriate strategic actions aimed at the improvement of their social position (Honneth 1986, 63).

These strategies are not the efforts of individuals but are possessed objectively. A quotation from *Distinction* captures this precisely. In the social and economic determinants of tastes, Bourdieu argues (1984, 101):

> . . . the differential experiences which the consumers have of it [the product or commodity] is a function of the dispositions they derive from their position in economic space. These experiences do not have to be felt in order to be understood with an understanding which may owe nothing to lived experience, still less to sympathy. The habitus, an objective relationship between two objectivities, enables an intelligible and necessary relation to be established between practices and a situation, the meaning of which is produced by the habitus through categories of perception and appreciation that are themselves produced by an observable social condition.

There are a number of issues here. As Jenkins has indicated, to use the terms utility maximization, interests and strategies in the acquisition of social status through the possession of rare goods, whilst at the same time denying any significant role to individual human agency, seems rather perverse. 'Despite definitional protestations to the contrary, the use of the word "interest" imports into the analysis either an unavoidable dimension of conscious calculative decision-making or an indefensible epistemological conceit' (Jenkins 1992, 87).
Jenkins goes on:

> . . . actors are more knowledgeable about the social world than Bourdieu is prepared to allow. To suggest this may appear unfair, given that his theory insists that people do know the 'objective probabilities' that govern their lives. This, however, is a strange form of knowledge, neither conscious nor unconscious, largely unidentifiable except inasmuch as it is analytically necessary to explain their behaviour. Even curiouser, it turns out to be a form of collective unconscious knowledge, about the life chances of categories of actors, although it forms the basis of individual practices. . . . Actors must know more about their situation, and that knowledge must be more valid, than Bourdieu proposes (Jenkins 1992, 97).

According to Elster (1983) Bourdieu's move to a conception of class utility maximization, regardless of the conscious actions of individuals, leaves his analysis devoid of any causal mechanism between dispositions and what people actually do. Elster (1983, 69–71, 101–8) reintroduces intentionality via a rational choice model but one that supports Bourdieu's conclusions even if it doesn't agree with how he got there. For Bourdieu the habitus produces practices through some unconscious mental and bodily process. Elster on the other hand argues that practices consciously fall in line with the habitus in order to relieve the cognitive stress caused by the disjuncture between individual preferences and what people can actually achieve. Like Aesop's fox, if I am prevented from eating the grapes then they must be sour anyway. Adaptive preference formation means that people fall in line with what is objectively possible both as a conscious act and as a way of relieving conscious distress. Elster thus offers a cognitive explanation for the development of everyday practices in line with class habitus. He argues that this overcomes the structural functionalism of Bourdieu's account by offering a mechanism – a causal cognitive process – that results in the confirmation of habitus

This might be largely unproblematic on a day-to-day basis. Yet there are times when the established practices do not fit with a new situation. The repertoire of responses summoned up from the habitus does not match the exigencies of a new field (the field here meaning the relationship between cultural and economic capital and the status of groups in social space). At these moments

of discontinuity unconscious processes might be inadequate to deal with the changed circumstances and conscious action must come into play. Calculative rationality may well be implicated in the translation of dispositions into practices in these instances.

However Wacquant (1989, 45) argues that such conscious choice is not important:

> The lines of action suggested by habitus may very well be accomplished by a strategic calculation of costs and benefits which tends to carry out at a conscious level the operations which habitus carries out in its own way . . . Times of crisis, in which routine adjustment of subjective and objective structures is brutally disrupted, constitute a class of circumstances when indeed 'rational choice' often appears to take over. But, and this is the crucial proviso, it is habitus itself that commands this option. We can always say that individuals make choices as long as we do not forget that they do not choose the principles of these choices.

I would argue that there is no necessary relation between habitus and choices. Just because choices are not the principles of choices does not mean that the choices themselves cannot influence the principles of future choices. To pursue this argument means engaging Bourdieu's habitus with rational action theory.

Bourdieu and rational action theory

Bourdieu is keen to highlight the competences of individuals in their everyday lives but not keen to rest any meaningful intentional action with them. As he argues (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 131) 'People are not fools; they are much less bizarre or deluded that we would spontaneously believe precisely because they have internalizsed, through a protracted and multisided process of conditioning, the objective chances they face'.

Bourdieu's objection to rational action theory (RAT) is part of a wider aversion to forms of subjectivism (including Satrean existentialism). His intellectual endeavour has been to construct a theory of practice that is neither subjectivist nor structuralist. He also has specific objections to RAT. They are, as Jenkins (1992, 73) summarizes them, that rational action theory:

1 Substitutes an arbitrary rationality or interest for the culturally defined and historically variable rationalities and interests of real life.
2 in doing so it substitutes the social scientist's analytical model for reality.
3 in locating the dynamic of social life in individual conscious decision making it ignores the individual and collective histories which unconsciously generate the ongoing reality of social life.
4 methodological individualism and rational action theory prevent theoretical apprehension of the relationships between individuals and between individuals and their environment – the proper object of social science.

Bourdieu's notion of arbitrary rationality or interest is an objection to the notion of interest in what he sees as the universalist, transhistorical pretensions of utilitarianism and interest as utility maximization. This is despite the fact that as Honneth has argued he uses instrumental utility maximization to explain the class-based striving for the rare goods of culture. As I see it the problem is that Bourdieu has an overly economistic interpretation of rational action theory. He takes utility maximization in RAT to mean profit and narrow economic goals. In RAT however, utility remains undefined. Utility can refer to egotism and altruism and encompasses a wide range of functions and ends that equate to Bourdieu's 'economy of practices'. Rationality in RAT refers to consistency over action in line with preferences. This equates to people doing the best for themselves (agnostically defined) within their constraints. It is hard to see how such a modest claim flies in the face of reality. Thirdly RAT does not necessarily ignore history. Shared histories of play can be a key element in defining future moves in repeated games (see Schelling 1980; Binmore 1992). Bourdieu's final objection misconstrues the nature of game theory. He has a notion of the agents in RAT as being 'little monads guided solely by internal reasons, executing a sort of perfectly rational internal program of action' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 136). However the game theory version of RAT is ineluctably social. The fate of all agents is determined by their constraints and the choices of others acting within their constraints. Agents must anticipate the choices of others in order to make their own choices knowing the other agents are doing the same. This is not the free choice of monads but choices conditioned by constraints and the intentions of others. It offers a possible mechanism for the coordination of

action (it is an understanding of the latter that so preoccupies Bourdieu).

Game theory is a long way from what Bourdieu takes to be rational action theory, namely the 'economic approach to life' of Gary Becker (see Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 118–120 and Bourdieu 1998, 106, 113). Becker is not a game theorist. Indeed his approach is not decisively different from the conventional neo-classical approach. Becker treats all forms of social relationship as though they were economic relationships. This is Robinson Crusoe economics with isolated individuals (monads) making choices in terms of independent marginal utility calculus. An agent's choices in the marriage market or in the division of domestic labour are made parametrically, as though she were playing the market. In stark contrast, as I have argued, the consideration of choices in game theory is interdependent on others who are also choosing – it is strategic and social rather than marketized and monadic. Bourdieu makes a grave error when he dismisses strategic interdependent action as part of the economism (correctly judged) of Becker.

What I am seeking to do here is to argue for a much greater part for the rational agent (of game theory) in Bourdieu's class schema and in our interpretations of gentrification. Bourdieu is right to introduce the notion of instrumental interest into cultural fields, for the reasons he gives about the need to treat the cultural not as some autonomous field of social meaning or independent aesthetic realm. In this regard rational action might help reinforce class and cultural processes by conforming and reconstituting class norms.

Bourdieu is offering an idea of utility maximization that does not rely on the actions of individuals because they might do their own thing. He wants to make sure they carry out the logic of the habitus without it ever having to be represented in the preferences of individual class agents. They can act only with a certain repertoire of responses. This might be what class is all about. But it is also conceivable that what is now necessary background that exists beyond rationalization and beyond consciousness most of the time had to be agreed upon in the past – it is the result of past rationalizations. After all why did the arrow symbol that Wittgenstein uses get so embedded in our cultural repertoire – precisely because it had a certain logical conspicuousness as an artefact that easily represents linear movement – making it particularly easy to rationalize as a common symbol. At other historical periods other technologies might serve analogous symbolic roles. It is thus too one-sided to argue that certain rules are indelible and so deep and unconscious that they cannot be worked on in future situations. Rules are worked upon and re-constituted all the time – and not just within their own logics of practice (to adapt Bourdieu's language) but in relation to other logics of practice. The relational element of practices Bourdieu understands very well but makes no allowance for in the renewal of the rules of the game. Renewal can come from conscious as well as unconscious acts. In unprecedented situations conscious renewal relies not just on past rules of action but also on the contemporary actions of other groups and on the social and material environment more generally.

It is conceivable that rational action can also lead to displacements and discontinuities in class processes that have consequences for the nature of the class habitus and subsequent relations with other classes. Rational action is not all about reinforcing sameness but can also be about radical disjunctures.

These disjunctures are most clearly evident in novel situations involving strategic encounter. Using the rational action approach several scenarios are possible. Actors may rationally intuit the right action based on their prior interactions with similar class actors. If games are repeated there will be a history of prior interaction on which agents can draw to help make their decisions. This shared history means that class agents can be fairly sure of the beliefs of others and so can make sound judgements about how others will be thinking and likely to act in the knowledge that the others are also trying to judge how the class agents with which they are interacting will act. This we might call the dispositions of habitus. They are traditions that allow the tacit reproduction of class. The power of these traditions can be seen from a rational action point of view.

> Among the possible sets of rules that might govern a conflict, tradition points to the particular set that everyone can expect everyone else to be conscious of as a conspicuous candidate for adoption; it wins by default over those that cannot readily be identified by tacit consent. The force of many rules of etiquette and social restraint ... including some that have been divested of their relevance or authority, seems to depend on their having become 'solutions' to a

> coordination game: everyone expects everyone to expect everyone to expect observance, so that non-observance carries the pain of conspicuousness (Schelling 1980, 91).

However class actors might also come upon situations where their prior dispositions do not provide them with any clear lead about how to act. The principles of choice provided by the habitus might produce too many potential 'leads'. If so, which one is chosen? In these situations actors must look to other features of the social, spatial or temporal situation that will give them a focus for their subsequent actions. Equally they might look at how unlike others are acting in order to act differently. The features that allow the coordination of activity in this way Schelling (1980) called 'focal points'. As Schelling (57) suggests:

> People can often concert their intentions or expectations with others if each knows that the other is trying to do the same. Most situations . . . provide some clues for coordinating behaviour, some focal point for each person's expectation of what the other expects him to expect to be expected to do. Finding the key . . . may depend on imagination more than on logic; it may depend on analogy, precedent, accidental arrangement, symmetry, aesthetic or geometric configuration.

In this context, features from outside the class habitus or from another class habitus might determine the way activity of a class is coordinated in future. These co-ordinations might be radical breaks from existing traditions. Indeed as Schelling argues the embedding of focal points is an activity of creating new traditions.

> [Actors] . . . must find ways of regulating their behaviour, communicating their intentions, letting themselves be led to some meeting of minds, tacit or explicit . . . The 'incidental details' may facilitate the players' discovery of expressive behaviour patterns; and the extent to which the *symbolic* contents of the game – the suggestions and connotations – suggest compromises, limits, and regulations that should be expected to make a difference. It should, because it can be a help to . . . players not to limit themselves to the abstract structure of the game in the search for stable . . . patterns of movement. The fundamental psychic and intellectual process is that of participating in the creation of *traditions*; and the ingredients out of which traditions can be created, or the materials in which potential traditions can be perceived and jointly recognised (Schelling 106, emphasis in original).

The coordination of activity on focal points is an outcome of conscious rational expectations. The example I pursue in the rest of the paper is the time/space focal point of gentrification activity for the new middle class.

Intentional action: the time-space strategy of gentrification

Class agents must attempt to coordinate their activities in the new situation and this involves a coordination of expectations about the situation. No one wants the conspicuousness of acting differently. New ways of coordinating activities can be seen as focal points that are seized upon because they have certain qualitative aspects that recommend them, through prominence or conspicuousness. The upshot of this is that at critical moments in the history of classes, new practices can emerge via focal points that might be a long way from previous practices. Focal points can be unpredictable and lead to very different practices.

Equally small-scale actions and purposes can result in larger adjustments in the symbolic order. Boudieu has paid great attention to the role of time as a symbolic force as well as its emergence out of practice. Space can play a similar role in the symbolic ordering of the cultural and class habitus. As Harvey has recognised there are important struggles '. . . that go on over the definition of what exactly is the right time and right place for what aspects of social practice' (Harvey 1989, 217).

Gentrification represents one form of restructuring of the symbolic orders of time and space in class relations. It emerges out of the rational coordination of action around a focal point that develops into a self-conscious class habitus.

There are several reasons why intentional action might be significant for an understanding of class constitution through gentrification. First of all it deals with a class or class fraction in formation. It is an emerging class fraction and so its members are likely to be conscious not only of their relationship to the working class but to other fractions of the middle class. This new class fraction is defined to some extent by their self-consciousness. The new middle class is a reflexive class. Whereas the dispositions of the traditional bourgeoisie are unschooled, tacit, unreflexive – the aesthetic practices of the new middle class are public, discursive and self-conscious. The very visibility of their aesthetic practices, their eye to fashion and trend setting whilst being solidly positioned is the very

stuff of the gentrification aesthetic. This class fraction engages in particular forms of reflexive consumption. These involve forms of consumption as social performance such as eating in certain restaurants and the polished but informal social engagements in wine bars and cafes. The self consciousness of this movement is embedded by the 'critical infrastructure' of restauranteurs, interior designers, food and wine critics that support and promote the consumption habits of this fraction of the middle class. The gentrification habitus is the subject of self-conscious dinner party conversation, magazine columns, and movies (Zukin 1982, 1991).

The performativity of the reflexive practices of the new middle class fraction is supported by the stage for the performance – central urban space. In this sense the emerging new middle class use a new spatial strategy for the expression of their class habitus. The hitherto devalorized inner city, becomes the symbol of vitality, accessibility and being at the heart of things. This mimics a time when another bourgeoisie held cultural sway in the centre of the Victorian city. Not surprisingly one of the strategies of this class fraction is to recapture that historic past through neighbourhood preservation movements and the politics of urban heritage (see Ley 1996).

The self-consciousness of the aesthetic I suggest deeply implicates a notion of individual conscious decision-making. Using recent research into the relationship between economic and cultural capital in the gentrified housing market of Sydney (Bridge, 2001) I argue how conscious decision-making occurs throughout the gentrification process. Young professionals must first choose a house downtown over available options in less central locations. The type of house they buy is a self-conscious act. At the time of the Sydney research completely unrenovated properties were at a premium, relative to properties that had structural alterations that could be gentrified. The fully unrenovated properties offered buyers the opportunity to place their own mark, to stamp their individuality on the place. Buying high priced unrenovated properties that will require considerable capital investment to restore is a risky decision. It is taking a gamble on future house prices on re-sale. The riskiness is reduced by renovating the house in a way that coordinates with the expectations of future buyers (the gentrification aesthetic). Sometimes these taste expectations are not met, shown in examples of overgentrification, where original Victorian wallpapers and colourings are used in faithful restoration that do not meet the balance of modern features (pastel wall paints, recessed lighting) with historic markers (fireplaces and stripped floors). There were also cases in the inner west of Sydney where some styles of renovation (such as the use of Italianate marble) are rejected because they do not meet the mores of Anglo-Saxon gentrification taste. Jager (1986) previously noted the fine balance between history and modernity, between the symbols of an aestheticized past and the contemporary markers of good taste that comprise the gentrification aesthetic. This balancing act with the gentrification aesthetic (making taste yield favourable price on re-sale) is the equivalent of the forms of social coordination over renovation that occurred when first wave gentrifiers moved into what they perceived to be risky inner urban neighbourhoods.

The renovation of working class inner urban housing is a set of practices inconceivable for the middle class 40 years ago. The ambiguity in the early days of gentrification was over just what sort of aesthetic would suffice to distinguish the middle class from their working class neighbours and to justify their purchase of property in inner urban neighbourhoods. If class distinction is a form of class-based utility maximization over rare goods, then coordination is required for displays of 'good taste' to be realized in prices in the market. The focal point proved to be the renovation and 'authentification' of the dwelling. This contrasted both with the modernizing of property by the working class and the more modern standardized properties of the traditional middle class in the suburbs. It was a conspicuous element in the environment that acted as a focal point. At first this activity was minimal, no more than a lick of paint, as Horvath and Engels (1985) have observed. Painting the house in pastel colours became a mark of distinction for those proto-gentrifiers who had neither the money nor the confidence to do anything else. Preservation rather than modernization thus began as a reaction to working class habitus. This move was reinforced by the sense of distinction it established between this urban middle-class and the middle class who occupied newer housing in the suburbs. In the inner urban neighbourhood it takes the form of overt housing display to signal difference and distinction from working class neighbours. Aesthetic signalling becomes a

qualitative aspect of the environment on which other middle class residents can coordinate in order to build up their class presence. This aesthetic display formed a way of coordinating rational expectations such that the new set of strategies were successful as a wider class movement in as much as taste then converted into price in the market values of the properties.

Gentrification provides an example where the class habitus is adapted to a new field as a result of the existing habitus and the articulation of prior dispositions. It also involves conscious choices involving the physical and social environment exercised by a few members of the 'urban' middle class and developing into a set of practices that became the focal point for wider class habitus. Key conscious choices at particular moments have an enormous influence, via the attractive power of focal points, on subsequent practices (see below). Class relations and class processes rely on unconscious dispositions and conscious choices. By altering the habitus they may be changing the principles of *future* choices.

It is important to note that this social coordination can occur tacitly (without explicit communication) between strangers. This suggests that rational coordination can take the form of an intuitive feel for the situation that involves no explicit communication. This comes close to Bourdieu's idea that action can be coordinated in the absence of a fully discursive plan. Rational intuition has the potential to play a significant role in Bourdieu's idea of habitus.

At an earlier point in the gentrification process this focal point might have been a product of explicit communication as a form of convergence on agreed aesthetic principles. This is the alternative model that suggests that early gentrifiers are part of social networks and they move into an area on friends' recommendations and to be close to them. Butler (1997) suggests as much for the gentrification of Hackney, London. Earlier work by the author suggests that social networks are a key recruitment device for gentrification (Bridge 1994, 1995a b). This explicit coordination is then built up into a wider movement by tacit forms of coordination between the incoming strangers.

This focal point becomes a larger time-space strategy. Central city space is redefined as desirable and a mark of distinction, recapturing an older tradition of the elite centre of the city prior to industrial capitalism. This re-ordering of the symbolic significance of central city space is set against working class history as well as middle-class suburbia. The symbolic ordering of space becomes a new set of class dispositions. Redefinitions of space are accompanied by a redefinition of time. The past history of the housing comes to represent a form of aestheticized authenticity. The ability to redefine and reorder time and space in these class practices is a mark of authority, an exercise of class power.

The focal point is a way of coordinating current behaviour and future expectations. Over time these expectations become stabilized into a form of shorthand calculation – a habitus. The gentrification habitus was not available in all circumstances. In those cities with a small service class or where deindustrialization and abandonment was so great, class coordination followed traditional routes of middle-class suburbanization, or even a form of suburban gentrification in neighbourhoods of suburban urbanites (Lang, Hughes and Danielson 1997).

Class and consciousness

The present argument offers a critical role for individual intentionality in class processes. In uncertain situations agents must try to select actions that they think others will choose. What helps here is for some group to have subjective assessments of objective probabilities that are slightly different from traditional assessments. These shifts can occur by chance or by force or as a result of different subjective probability assessments. What the search for new forms of coordination gives is a weight of anticipation that will converge on any new focal point that is selected. This can take the form of a kind of intuitive fumbling about to find a hook for action. Once the hook has been found rational expectations lead to convergence. These new forms of social coordination can be very powerful. People subscribe to them because they are maximizing their utility: they need to coordinate their activities and in the presence of a focal point they will converge on it. Given what they think others will choose they are content not to change their choices. The point here is that people can consciously subscribe to norms of expectation and behaviour, even if they are not in their best interests because they are doing the best for themselves given their

anticipations of how they think others will choose. This is equivalent to Bourdieu's 'subjective assessments' of 'objective probabilities'. This approach means that we do not need recourse to some unconscious mechanism that somehow aligns utility calculations of individuals. Nor do we need a form of explanation that relies on a group utility calculation (a form of group disposition over probabilities).

Convergence on a new equilibrium allows for two things not present in Bourdieu's formula – a model of the utility calculus of individuals leading to certain class habitus and the potential for those individual calculations to provide innovations in uncertain circumstances that via focal points leads to new habitus or new inflections on existing habitus. This approach also exceeds Elster's model, a model that brings in conscious agency but only insofar as it explains why class habitus stays the same – not how it might develop and find new forms of distinction.

Gentrification is one such new form of distinction. Once a focal point is chosen, often by chance or almost imperceptible actions, rational expectations fall behind it to reinforce the future course of action. Aesthetics are particularly important in this regard because they offer a broad and creative range of potential focal points of future action. Yet they constantly have to be worked on. As has been argued elsewhere (Bridge 2001) the gentrification aesthetic is constantly on the move. The boundaries of the aesthetic are constantly being tested, in the acquisition of modern goods on one side and the identification of historical symbols on the other. The historical balance can be exceeded in forms of over-gentrification, and other ethnic forms of renovation can fall outside the boundaries of gentrification good taste. House prices reflect different forms of renovation and act as signal to the conscious aesthetic activities of gentrifiers against the choices of others in their class. The anticipation of the dimensions of this relationship between taste and price are constantly being negotiated. It is also open to manipulation by the cultural workers of the critical infrastructure who attempt to move this coordination of expectation in particular directions.

There are moments when conscious action counts for a great deal in the future direction of the habitus. At later moments when the habitus is re-established conscious action becomes less decisive. But it is not entirely absent. The class habitus is a constant state of negotiation between individualistic interpretation and class-based dispositions. The intentional element is a balance between personal action and social expectation. This is particularly acute in the early stages of the process when it has not received the seal of approval as a class strategy, before it is an accepted way of doing things. Some of the gentrifiers who were interviewed in Butler's London study reveal this dilemma.

For example as one of Butler's respondents explains it:

> . . . I was doing my graduate research, so I was on a grant and it was near the station. The main advantage was cheap, economy but at the same time in an urban setting. We had been living in a rented flat in Fulham and part of me thought that living in the inner city was quite interesting but part of me was quite embarrassed about having to explain where it was as nobody knew it. I used to kick myself for hearing myself almost apologise for living here; I would go into a long explanation about that was where I lived and it was really very interesting and full of local colour whereas if you said something like that when you were talking to people from the same class or background that you were being somewhat rebellious or strange to be living in Stoke Newington, not just that you were poor (Butler 1997, 111).

The respondent's embarrassment is part of what Schelling calls the pain of conspicuousness. Having to explain one's actions shows a vulnerability that a secure class habitus would otherwise take care of.

The gentrification aesthetic is deployed to obtain distinction from the conventional middle-class suburbs and from working-class taste in the central city. Working-class taste and habitus has been ignored by the gentrification literature. In part this is because in many gentrified neighbourhoods the working class are displaced and cannot be traced for research purposes. In neighbourhoods where they remain their tastes are assumed to be the opposite of the middle-class, seen in forms of 'incumbent upgrading' (Clay 1979) which stress modernization of the property in contrast to the efforts at authentification of the gentrifiers. Ley (1996) emphasizes the consumption habits of the new middle class favouring niched goods – against the presumed consumption of mass produced goods by the working class. Earlier research in London (Bridge 1994) suggested some disdain of the new middle-class tastes for Victorian terraced housing from some younger working-class residents who showed an aspiration for more

spacious, prestigious houses in the suburbs – to get out of the neighbourhood meant getting on. Wynne and O'Connor (1998) have more recently raised questions about the degree to which the new middle class habitus is distinct, stressing middle brow tastes that met across class lines. What is clear is that any approach concerned with the taste strategies of gentrifers must take into account of working-class taste and habitus – and this requires empirical research.

Conclusion

Gentrification is a class strategy that symbolically and then materially reorganizes the rare goods of time-space. Gentrification activity is a focal point that establishes new class traditions in the adjustment of the habitus to an altered field. This approach suggests a number of developments for the analysis of class and of gentrification. First there is considerable scope for a rapprochement between Bourdieu's class analysis and rational action theory. RAT offers a mechanism to link dispositions to actions but in novel ways as well as in traditions of class habitus. It suggests that class processes contain unpredictability beyond the principles of class choice. There should be a rebalancing of the idea of habitus to include intentional action as both an explicit and implicit or intuitive process. The relationship between bodily hexis and intentional action deserves re-examination. The class dynamic of gentrification also suggests that Bourdieu's privileging of time as a symbolic ordering of social processes should be adjusted to take on the notion of time-space strategies. The approach argues that utility maximization over rare goods can have microfoundations. Rational agency should be recognized as a key 'switching point' in class processes. The focal point of gentrification is not just confined to middle-class habitus however. A RAT approach to gentrification demands a thorough examination of the relational nature of gentrification as a class process. It requires that we look at working class taste and habits in this process rather than assume it as the 'other' of gentrification.

Note

1 Here I fully acknowledge the importance of Smith's (1996) critique of the 'othering' discourse and politics of gentrification in which the gentrifiers are cast as brave pioneer settlers in a hostile (working class) environment. Indeed this paper stresses the importance of putting working-class habitus, tastes and aspirations at the centre of the analysis, rather than just assuming its characteristics. Nevertheless, from the perspective of first wave gentrifiers moving (or staying put) in the inner city must have been seen as economically and perhaps socially risky – for some evidence see Butler's work (1997).

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