

# PRESENTATION: THE POROUS BORDERS OF THE CONTEMPORARY CULTURAL UNIVERSE<sup>1</sup>

*APRESENTAÇÃO: AS FRONTEIRAS POROSAS DO UNIVERSO CULTURAL CONTEMPORÂNEO*

*PRESENTACIÓN: LAS FRONTERAS POROSAS DEL UNIVERSO CULTURAL CONTEMPORÁNEO*

*Marco Antonio de ALMEIDA\**

*Giulia CRIPPA\*\**

This dossier stems from a clear observation: over the past three decades, intertwined technological, social, and political changes have led to transformations in the boundaries of social fields, the construction of habitus, and related social performances across different spheres of society. The articles in this dossier explore various facets of the dynamics of distinction, consecration, and symbolic resistance within contemporary cultural fields, shaped by gender, globalization, tradition, and aesthetics. What unites these texts is their shared focus on how cultural and social agents position themselves within specific fields in pursuit of recognition through the accumulation of different forms of capital.

Twenty years after the death of Pierre Bourdieu, his work *La Distinction* (1979) remains a cornerstone for scholars in the sociology of culture. Even those who do not fully (or even mostly) align with his ideas acknowledge the necessity of engaging with his core concepts, such as *cultural capital*, *habitus*, *social space*,

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\* Full Professor at FFCLRP-USP and the Postgraduate Program in Information Science, School of Communications and Arts-USP. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2481-8571>. Contact: [marcoaa@ffclrp.usp.br](mailto:marcoaa@ffclrp.usp.br).

\*\* Professor at the Department of Cultural Property, University of Bologna, Italy, and the Postgraduate Program in Information Science, School of Communications and Arts-USP. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6711-3144>. Contact: [giulia.crippa69@gmail.com](mailto:giulia.crippa69@gmail.com).

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*lifestyle, homology, and distinction*. The book begins with a fundamental premise: the “class struggle” can be understood as a “struggle over classifications” – symbolic ones. By revisiting the theme of classifications – so central to anthropology – and linking it to the question of power, Bourdieu constructs an analysis that continues to wield considerable influence. Its theoretical and empirical relevance has made it a recurrent starting point for reflection and debate within the Social Sciences (Bennett et al., 2008; Coulangeon & Duval, 2015; Méndez & Gayo, 2019).

Many of the diagnoses found in these collections share a common perspective on the decline of high culture as a central tool of social distinction. It has become apparent that the upper classes no longer maintain an exclusive preference for legitimized culture, instead adopting more eclectic cultural tastes – just as middle and working-class groups no longer necessarily recognize the symbolic value of high culture. In other words, although high culture played a central role in identifying elites at certain historical moments, today, it struggles to function as *cultural capital* because, to produce domination, it must be socially recognized.

Thus, it is anachronistic to think of contemporary societies through the lens of France in the 1960s and 1970s, when the legitimacy of “cultivated” culture was distributed asymmetrically across society. This premise is increasingly difficult to sustain today. Yet, it leaves us with an important lesson: *distinction* is only possible when anchored in values that are socially recognized as legitimate. This leads us to a crucial question: what are today’s cultural practices and legitimizing instances that structure the cultural sphere? The question is posed in the plural precisely because the notion of a single legitimacy – that of bourgeois culture, as proposed by Bourdieu (1979) – is now under scrutiny due to a series of transformations.

These are not merely shifts in information and communication media, reducible to a technological transition from one era to another (as some authors claim), but rather a broader set of political, economic, and cultural changes with strategic implications. These include: the increasing industrialization of information and culture and the concentration of media conglomerates and their networks; the daily platformization of essential services across various sectors; the commodification of education in contrast to the inclusion of working-class students through affirmative action policies; the global rise of far-right movements (and their associated reactionary agendas); and the consolidation of cultural groups and collectives attuned to identity-based and inclusive demands.

We may, therefore, ask to what extent these factors – considered either in isolation or in combination – have altered the processes of construction and legitimation within cultural fields. Is the cultivated disposition, or *habitus cultivé*, truly losing its distinctive power in today’s social space? What new criteria of distinction are being developed in the cultural fields? What resources are being mobilized or sought in these positional games?

Considering that recent social processes have allowed peripheral agents to circulate more widely within the consecrated spaces of legitimate culture – spaces once reserved for the elite – this question is not rooted in a nostalgic or aristocratic perspective. Rather, it acknowledges new configurations of specific forms of cultural capital, as well as the emergence of new references and legitimizing instances. These include the incorporation of different values, languages, and modes of expression that differ significantly from those classically established by earlier analyses.

A possible critique of the diagnosis proposed in *La Distinction* (1979) is its temporal inadequacy in relation to the contemporary world, insofar as the expansion of media domains has increasingly subordinated autonomous cultural spheres to the logic of the market. Traditional cultural institutions no longer hold the same authority over market dynamics that Bourdieu observed in the 1970s. As early as 1994, Renato Ortiz argued that this reading of sociological tradition regarding the autonomy of the arts was a Eurocentric perspective (Ortiz, 1994). In both North and South America, the artistic world encountered a distinct set of contradictions before becoming established as a “legitimate” source of cultural life. Rocha (2022) brings Ortiz into dialogue with other authors, such as Lahire and Lamont, who point out that the pyramidal model of cultural hierarchy found in *La Distinction* proves inadequate when applied to other contexts – particularly those where cultural legitimacy is contested by alternative institutions, such as the media. Cultural dynamics outside France (and Europe in general) involve more multifaceted processes of development of taste.

However, Ortiz (2013) suggests, in the preface to a volume introducing Bourdieu’s writings, that the clues to overcoming this model can be found within Bourdieu’s work. This is evident in his book on television (Bourdieu, 1997), where he discusses how media influences the dynamics of other social fields, or in his lecture series on science, in which he explores the external threats to scientific autonomy. The complexity of the current scenario is deepened by the fact that much of the criticism directed at Bourdieu’s perspective comes from scholars who are deeply influenced by his work and who seek to engage with his legacy in contexts increasingly marked by porous boundaries between spheres of cultural production – often adopting a critical stance that oscillates between respect and softening of objections (Rocha, 2022).

One such scholar is Hjarvard (2014), who highlights the limitations of Bourdieu’s analyses of the media, noting that communication platforms have increasingly extended their presence across the heterogeneous poles of each field, thereby challenging and weakening their autonomy. The intensified monitoring of the broader social environment has become increasingly relevant in shaping the habitus. In this context, recognition takes on a central role as a regulatory mechanism of self-esteem and behavior, manifesting in lifestyles sanctioned by others. Although

he maintains a dialogue with Bourdieu and acknowledges the role of social classes in this process, Hjarvard (2014, p. 235, our translation) argues that “categorical distinctions such as class or age may not directly influence habitus but are instead mediated by the lifestyle of the group in question.” In doing so, he emphasizes the growing importance of lifestyle as a mediator of social and cultural hierarchies in contemporary societies, while pointing to the decline of traditional institutional influence and the rising centrality of the media in this process. As he puts it: “by effectively articulating various audience networks around media-influenced lifestyles, the media become part of both the reproduction and renewal of the population’s cultural and social distinctions” (Hjarvard, 2014, p. 235, our translation). Couldry and Hepp (2020) reinforce this approach – also drawing on Bourdieu’s thought – by simultaneously emphasizing the institutional character of each social field and the media-driven constitution of social reality enabled by mediatization.

Thus, media do not merely contribute to the reproduction of habitus but also to its renewal, providing symbolic resources for constructing lifestyles and moral orientations. Hjarvard’s concern, however, is not to assess whether the “institutionalization” of biographies and lifestyles through media results in creativity or conformity. Rather, his focus is on highlighting the integrative function of media, which actively participates in the certification, dissemination, and filtering of information. A key factor in this process is the multiplication of mediating figures. According to Ortiz (2025), symbolic mediators act as links between legitimate consecrating instances and those outside this privileged circuit – the public. In this sense, he sees them as supporting actors in a script that unfolds beyond their control. Nevertheless, they still constitute an important structural element to be considered in contemporary cultural analysis.

Let us consider the specific case of digital influencers, who stand out for their interactivity and the use of cross-referentiality as central features of digital environments that build networks of communicative interaction and circulation of specialized information. These practices are selective in terms of audience, reaching specific segments aligned with the themes addressed. It is in this context that the notion of “micro-celebrities” becomes relevant – individuals who achieve visibility within well-defined niches, even if they do not necessarily reach mass-scale recognition (Almeida, 2022; Ortiz, 2025). Despite the internet’s potential for global reach, factors such as language, social class, and specific interactional circuits limit these figures’ sphere of influence to a narrower, microstructural scale. On the other hand, one could argue that the sociological significance of these individuals lies precisely in their ability to traverse social microcosms and influence the broader social space by introducing new forms of habitus production and circulating principles of vision and social division that emerge outside traditional cultural fields. In this sense, a question raised by Ortiz further complicates the matter: what cultural practices today could truly be considered distinctive?

Another important point in this discussion is the weight of intervening factors that originate “outside” the strictly cultural-artistic domain but have increasingly shaped the processes by which works and authors are symbolically sanctioned. One notable example is the so-called “cancel culture,” which impacts both the cultural industry and the sphere of “high” or legitimate culture.

In her book *É possível dissociar a obra do autor? (Can One Dissociate the Work from the Author?)*, (2022), sociologist Gisèle Sapiro critically examines the notion of separating a work of art or literature from its creator, especially in cases where the author is accused or proven to be involved in ethically problematic behavior such as misogyny, racism, or sexual violence. Drawing particularly on Bourdieu’s sociology of culture, Sapiro argues that works are not purely autonomous entities: they circulate within social fields governed by specific rules, logic, and hierarchies. The reception of a work is, therefore, always embedded in historical and social contexts. She contends that the debate should not be reduced to a binary choice between “canceling” or “celebrating” controversial authors but should instead account for the responsibility that works carry in either reproducing or challenging dominant discourses. She advocates for critique and contextualization as productive ways to engage with problematic works. Rather than offering a single solution, Sapiro proposes a critical approach that considers both the context of a work’s production and its reception – one that allows for symbolic accountability without falling into moralism or simplistic erasure.

On the other hand, if factors such as gender, race, and social class can be mobilized to discredit authors and their works, the opposite trend is also evident. Cultural funding opportunities increasingly weigh identity affiliations or the disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds of applicants positively – a process largely identified as “social inclusion” within the artistic and cultural field. However, this also brings into play the dynamics of *tokenism*, where individuals or groups are symbolically or occasionally included in cultural, institutional, or media spaces as representatives of a minority or underrepresented identity, without necessarily leading to real structural changes within the field. In fact, it is quite common for institutions to use the presence of a person – typically from a historically marginalized group (whether racialized, gendered, sexually diverse, or from a subordinated class) – as a symbol of diversity or inclusion, without offering meaningful power, visibility, or transformation of the dominant structures that shape the cultural field.

This dossier does not aim to provide definitive – or even provisional – answers to such a complex set of questions. Rather, it seeks to contribute, through the collection of its articles, with reflections that engage this thematic horizon from diverse empirical and epistemological perspectives.

The first four articles in the dossier share a common concern with the role of culture in either reproducing or transforming social inequalities. The first three texts

emphasize how different forms of cultural capital – whether digital, symbolic, or gastronomic – continue to operate as mechanisms of distinction, even as they adapt to new contexts such as the digital age, conscious consumption, or globalized tourism. The fourth article, while also focused on cultural heritage, shifts the emphasis from distinction to inclusion, proposing cultural well-being as a collective right. In this way, while the initial articles reinforce Bourdieu's critique of the subtle forms of symbolic exclusion, the last one points toward more democratic and community-oriented uses of culture.

In “The construction of cultural capital two digital neonatives: generation z, digitalization and school performance,” Elder Patrick Maia Alves and Debora Nunes de Souza Lima explore how Generation Z – born into a highly digitized world – builds its cultural capital. Their research shows that while traditional cultural capital, passed down by families and validated by schools, has lost some of its centrality, fragments of that capital – internalized from early childhood – remain crucial to academic performance. Moreover, young people from higher-income and more educated families have access to a technological infrastructure at home that supports the development of digital informational capital. The combination of these two types of capital contributes to cognitive competencies valued by standardized exams like the ENEM, revealing stark disparities in access to cultural and technological resources across social classes.

Maria Celeste Mira and Beatriz Salgado Cardoso de Oliveira, in “The elegant casualness: reflections on slow fashion through brands of São Paulo city”, analyze the practices of slow fashion brands in São Paulo between 2023 and 2024, examining how ecological awareness and sustainability discourses influence fashion consumption patterns. The article questions whether these new values might render Bourdieu's concepts – especially that of distinction – obsolete. However, the data indicate that even in environments where “politically correct” ideals such as ethical and sustainable consumption prevail, mechanisms of social distinction persist – albeit in new forms. Slow fashion, despite its appeal to environmental consciousness, continues to affirm the cultural and symbolic capital of consumers who can identify and value these emerging forms of differentiated consumption.

In “Gastronomic heritage, tourist mobility and distinction,” Giulia Crippa and Marco Antonio de Almeida analyze how gastronomy, particularly in tourism contexts, functions as an instrument of social distinction. Food is presented not just as a daily practice, but as an expression of cultural identity and symbolic capital. The consumption of traditional dishes and fine wines is closely linked to cultural capital and serves as a class marker that has only intensified with the globalization and mediatization of the gastronomic experience. Enogastronomic tourism reveals a segmentation between elite consumers and average tourists, pointing to exclusionary practices legitimized by narratives built around culinary



heritage. The article's central critique targets the use of tradition as a strategy for distinction and exclusion.

In the fourth article of the dossier, "New perspectives on cultural well-being: the role of the third sector in cultural heritage," Italian sociologists Roberta Paltrinieri and Giulia Allegrini explore the role of "heritage communities" – social groups engaged in the preservation of cultural assets – as agents of cultural well-being, drawing on research conducted in Italy between 2021 and 2022. The study views these communities as innovative forms of civic engagement and collective care, linking culture and health. The authors propose recognizing culture as a factor in promoting well-being, in line with WHO recommendations. The article highlights the role of the third sector in shaping inclusive and sustainable cultural policies, with the potential to transform cultural access into an everyday practice of care and social belonging.

The analyses presented in these articles strongly engage with Pierre Bourdieu's key concepts, especially those of cultural capital, habitus, and distinction. In the first three articles, we see the persistence of cultural capital as a tool for social differentiation, even as it evolves into digital, sustainable, or gastronomic formats. Distinction, in this sense, is maintained through symbolic practices legitimated by specific social groups. The fourth article, by contrast, proposes a shift in the traditional Bourdieusian approach, suggesting that cultural practices can also function as tools for inclusion and collective care. Still, even this more optimistic perspective must reckon with the structural limitations Bourdieu identified in the reproduction of inequalities within cultural institutions.

The next four articles converge in their exploration of how different cultural practices – music, popular traditions, feminist art, and human-animal relationships – function as mechanisms for symbolic construction and social distinction. The articles on Madonna, Anitta, and Pablo Vittar, as well as the one on maracatu abroad, address the circulation and re-signification of symbolic goods in global contexts, highlighting how issues of legitimacy and identity are negotiated within transnational arenas. In contrast, the articles on feminist artists and exotic pets explore forms of resistance and distinction within local contexts, though through different avenues: one by confronting gender-based exclusion in the art world, the other by assigning symbolic value to unconventional aesthetic and emotional preferences. What they share is a focus on the dynamics of visibility, recognition, and consecration within symbolic fields shaped by power and capital struggles.

In "Representation in the sociotechnical arrangements for legitimizing contemporary popular singing", Edson Farias investigates the circuits of visibility and symbolic legitimacy in contemporary popular music, focusing on Madonna's performance in Copacabana in May 2024. The analysis centers on the representational strategies employed by artists such as Madonna, Anitta, and Pablo Vittar, examining

their trajectories as symbolic constructions that intertwine morality, identity, and cultural capital. The study proposes the concept of “visibility/legitimation arrangements” to understand how these artistic encounters produce fluid forms of legitimacy and recognition in the global circulation of images, particularly in the realm of pop music and affirmative identity politics.

Luciana Ferreira Moura Mendonça, in her article “Maracatu de Baque Virado in the global north: transits, legitimations and subjectivities”, examines the internationalization of *maracatu de baque virado*, a traditional rhythm from Brazil’s Northeast, by analyzing its presence in European countries such as Germany and the United Kingdom. Through interviews and document analysis, the study shows how maracatu is reinterpreted outside Brazil, acquiring new meanings and subjectivities in transnational contexts. The research highlights the networks linking European groups to traditional *nações* in Recife, revealing that the global circulation of such cultural practices involves processes of legitimation and negotiation between tradition, authenticity, and adaptation to the cultural dynamics of the Global North.

In “Feminist arts to brighten gloomy alleys: gender, DIY and other art scenes in the global south”, Paula Guerra discusses the artistic production of women in the Global South through feminist, decolonial, and intersectional lenses. The focus is on “do-it-yourself” (DIY) cultural practices, seen not only as acts of resistance but as affirmative modes of artistic existence in the face of patriarchal structures and symbolic inequalities. Drawing on interviews with thirty Brazilian artists, the article examines how these women build cultural (re)existence on the margins of the traditional art system, confronting and re-signifying the symbolic violence that intersects their gendered and territorial experiences.

Jorge Leite Jr explores the phenomenon of “exotic” or “non-conventional” pets as markers of social distinction in his article “Exotic, distinctive and loved: “unconventional pets” in the city of São Paulo – Brazil”. Grounded in Human-Animal Studies, market data, and fieldwork in specialized pet shops, the study argues that the distinctiveness lies not just in owning the animal, but in the aesthetic and emotional sensibility involved in its selection. The preference for pets such as reptiles, exotic birds, or rare rodents reflects not only affective consumption but also a desire for symbolic differentiation, where singular tastes reinforce the cultural and symbolic capital of their guardians.

This second set of four articles can be read particularly in light of the concepts of field, symbolic capital, and distinction. In all cases, the legitimacy of cultural practices is contested – whether in the field of pop music, popular traditions, feminist visual arts, or even affective consumption involving animals. The agents involved position themselves within specific fields, seeking to accumulate various forms of capital (cultural, symbolic, aesthetic, affective) in order to gain recognition. Distinction, in Bourdieu’s terms, appears both in explicit strategies of



differentiation (as with exotic pets) and in symbolic resistance to hegemonic orders (as with feminist artists from the Global South). The transnational circulation of cultural practices further illustrates the interplay between local *habitus* and global reconfigurations, while still operating within the frameworks of consecration and exclusion that structure cultural fields.

The article on Madonna, Anitta, and Pablo Vittar reveals how media visibility can serve as a tool for symbolic legitimation while simultaneously reconfiguring cultural capital around identity-based agendas. The convergence of artists whose careers are marked by advocacy for minority groups underscores the interplay between aesthetics, politics, and symbolic consumption. Complementing this, the study on *maracatu de baque virado* in the Global North highlights the international circulation of Brazilian cultural capital, showing how traditional practices are adapted and re-signified in foreign contexts. The tension between authenticity and appropriation emerges as a central axis, mediated through the dynamic between tradition and performance.

In contrast, the article on Brazilian feminist artists brings resistance to the forefront. The engagement of these women in non-hegemonic artistic subcultures reveals a form of symbolic capital accumulation and conversion grounded in gender dissidence and collective action. Here, capital is not only a means of distinction but also a tool for symbolic and subjective survival.

Lastly, the study on non-conventional pets illustrates how affective consumption also functions as a mode of taste expression, tied to the guardians' sensibilities and aesthetic capital. The choice of unusual animals reflects a form of symbolic distinction mediated by affection, but also by a cultural capital that recognizes the "exotic" as an aesthetic and social value.

Together, the articles affirm the continued relevance of Bourdieu's theory, demonstrating how cultural, symbolic, and aesthetic capital remain central forces in the dynamics of consecration and exclusion – even as these forces operate within contemporary frameworks shaped by new logics of representation, affect, and cultural globalization.

The dossier concludes with an interview conducted by Livia de Tommasi with Eleilson Leite, former coordinator of the NGO *Ação Educativa* and long-time creator and curator of the *Periphery Cultural Agenda* in São Paulo. The interview offers a critical reflection on the political, cultural, and aesthetic significance of "peripheral cultures," exploring their conditions of possibility as well as their limitations.

We extend our heartfelt thanks to the authors who contributed to this dossier, and we hope it will inspire rich and thought-provoking reflections for its readers.

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