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Elite (Un)Conspicuousness: Theoretical Reflections on Ostentation vs. Understatement

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Abstract: »Zur (Un)Sichtbarkeit von Eliten: Theoretische Überlegungen zum Umgang mit den Insignien der Macht«. Comparative research suggests that in some settings the conspicuous flaunting of one's assets is expected, while "unconspicuousness" is likely to be interpreted in terms of diffidence or lack of wherewithal. Conversely, in other contexts, distinction may require studied understatement, and an excessive concern with display of rank would eventually undermine one's reputation. Yet, social theorists have often tended to see only one side of the coin. The purpose of this article is to highlight complexity and propose various hypotheses for dealing with significant variations in elite behaviour, with a view to developing non-dogmatic interpretations of the logics underpinning conspicuousness and unconspicuousness.

Keywords: elites, social distinction, comparative analysis, conspicuousness, unconspicuousness.

Introduction

One of my goals is to encourage the development of a truly comparative analysis of social distinction. In particular, I hope to contribute to a better understanding of the diverse symbolic forms through which superiority is manifested across time and place. My focus is mainly theoretical, but not without a degree of scepticism with regard to the universalising tendencies of grand systematic explanations. The following essay presented to John Higley (who has been a major driving force in the field of elite studies, both as a theorist of neo-elitism and as key organiser of so many important conferences) is an extension of my latest book *The Sociology of Elite Distinction* (Daloz 2010). This book sought to assess in terms of their applicability the major theoretical frameworks dealing with social distinction at the top of social hierarchies. More precisely, my aim was to emphasise both the virtues and limitations of available models of interpretation when confronted with diverse empirical realities cutting across a wide spectrum of environments. I argued that, while most of these models provide useful insight, they are often typical products of the societies from

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which they are derived. Consequently, they should be seen as tools, more or less operational, depending on the context under analysis.

I now aim to go beyond this first, necessarily critical step, and develop foundations for a comparative analysis that would avoid the pitfalls of ethnocentrism and reductionism. I harbour serious doubts as to the possibility and relevance of reasoning in terms of ubiquitous causes and do not intend to erect a new (overarching) grand theory. Instead, I favour an inductive approach that involves identifying diverging patterns of distinction and proposing hypotheses to account for significant dissimilarities when they are encountered. In that sense, the present article outlines one of the central topics covered in a forthcoming volume entitled *Rethinking Social Distinction*, that of ostentation vs. understatement.

Comparative research suggests that in some contexts the conspicuous flaunting of one's assets is expected, while "unconspicuousness"¹ is likely to be interpreted in terms of diffidence or lack of wherewithal. Conversely, in other contexts, distinction may require studied understatement, whereas an excessive concern with display of rank would eventually undermine one's reputation. Yet, social theorists have often tended to see only one side of the coin. For example, Veblen (1994 [1899], 24) famously asserted that wealth and power were meant to be conspicuous – which probably seemed obvious in the United States of the late nineteenth century. On the other hand, Bourdieu (1979, 271ff.), who studied the French bourgeoisie in the 1960-70s, put forward the idea that upper-strata groups rely on discreet (mainly embodied) markers of status and enjoy a kind of natural distinction owing to the habitus they have acquired. In practice, both interpretations may prove to be (in)applicable. The point, therefore, is not to determine which theorists are wrong and which are right; rather, it is how to come to terms with the fact that their statements often make sense within the contexts they have studied but cannot necessarily be applied beyond them.

My purpose is to work toward a non-dogmatic interpretation of the logics underpinning elite conspicuousness and unconspicuousness. These two attitudes are discussed below. I will highlight the limits of abstract sociology and conventional political analyses and argue that they must be supplemented

¹ I am deliberately using the neologism "unconspicuousness", and not the more usual term "inconspicuousness". The latter has an essentially privative, rather than negative, meaning. Something that is conspicuous has a property of salience (of whatever nature), which means that it stands out immediately; something that is inconspicuous simply does not have that property. On the other hand, the term "unconspicuousness" better suggests a direct negation of conspicuousness and therefore seems more appropriate for what I intend to describe and analyse. I am indebted to Neil Martin for helpful discussions on this point during his stay at the University of Oxford in 2009-2010. I also wish to thank him for proof-reading this paper, and to acknowledge the support of the "OxPo" Program as well as that of the Maison Française d'Oxford.

by a full consideration of the cultural variability of attitudes toward distinction at the apex of societies.

Interpreting Conspicuousness

We may start from the premise that conspicuousness must be analysed in terms of symbolic information aimed at asserting, or sustaining, a dominant social position. From a theoretical point of view, the distinction between affirmation and confirmation is not insignificant, for which reason I will treat the two separately.

Affirmation

Given the stratified and competitive nature of most societies, the need for assertions of superiority arises in most social contexts. Analytically, we can learn much from the following question: affirmation primarily over whom? Here, several answers are possible. Obviously, we have affirmation over, and distinction from, social subordinates. Although this probably does not require much elaboration, it should be recalled that, following Bourdieu and others, this kind of differentiation is typically asserted against those on the rung immediately below, who are frequently perceived as representing the greatest threat of “vertical confusion”. It is worth adding that the display of conspicuous signals of status may equally be used as a means of disconfirming a stigmatized identity and pointing to social worth.²

Often overlooked by sociologists (if not ignored altogether³) are the logics of distinction between the people at the top of social hierarchy. Yet, as empirical research shows, this intra-elite competition among prominent social actors is often of more crucial importance to them than domination over the lower strata, which is largely taken for granted. Needless to say, the desire for publicity is particularly manifest in the case of newcomers endeavouring to secure their position on the social scene vis-à-vis the older elites. In this respect, one can point to new dynasties (e.g. the Medici, the Bonaparte) eager to establish themselves; to paroxysms of ostentation during periods of extreme social mobility, such as the American “upstart era” caustically analysed by Veblen; or to the current frenzy with which *nouveaux riches* acquire positional goods in countries enjoying rapid economic growth after years of deprivation.⁴

² See, e.g. Lamont and Molnar 2001.

³ This is often the case with Marxist writings. For instance, in his work on the promenade ritual in nineteenth-century New York Central Park, Scobey (1992), obsessed as he is with the idea of the bourgeois New Yorkers’ celebration of class distinction from excluded others, does not even devote one line to the merciless symbolic struggles among these elites.

⁴ See, e.g. Chadda and Husband (2006) on Eastern and Southern Asia.

Another issue concerns the statements of status through which a group as a whole raises its standing with respect to other neighbouring entities. Here elites are expected to give an impressive representation of the community, faction or polity they claim to stand for. Conspicuousness may certainly serve as an indication of their personal success, but what is equally at stake is a collective image. From a top-down point of view, the intention is not to draw a status line with social inferiors but, on the contrary, to rally them within the framework of a symbolic battle against other leaders championing other groups. On the other hand, from a bottom-up perspective, supporters may bask in the reflected glory of their champions' perceived superiority.⁵

Confirmation

To what extent do elites continuously have to prove themselves in order to maintain social recognition? My view is that one variable is crucial here, namely the degree to which social actors staking their claim to worth can be sure that those they are staking it with are already aware of their superior status.⁶ This brings us to another key variable: the more or less anonymous nature of communication within a given context. The familiar social world and lasting appraisals among members of small communities can be contrasted here with the impersonal, momentary and often uncertain evaluations between urbanites. In large cities, social actors are frequently brought into contact with strangers (and subjected to their scrutiny); they are also likely to meet relevant peers only on an irregular basis – which calls for the maintenance of a consistent, enhancing self-image.⁷ The study of elite interaction at the international level may reveal similar complications.⁸ Consequently, more (first) impression management and subsequent confirmations are often necessary. In any case, people who endeavour to project an image of superiority cannot escape the fact

⁵ Readers may refer to my analysis of the Nigerian case. See Daloz (2002) for an illustration of this within the context of political representation; for a summary in English, see my Chapter 10 in Chabal and Daloz (2006).

⁶ A telling illustration in this respect is that of the Canaque chief who refused to wear the uniform distributed by the French colonial power in New Caledonia because all "his people" were already aware of his position.

⁷ In this respect, see Ewen (1988, 72ff.) for an enlightening discussion on "marks of distinction" as an attempt to escape anonymity and on style as "a kind of armour" for city life.

⁸ If only because of the doubts social actors harbour regarding what others know about them (with possible negative stereotyping). What I have in mind is not only the increasing acuteness of cross-comparisons driven by the current process of globalisation, but also the fleeting nature of socio-political supremacy. Looking at the current difficulties encountered by the so-called "PIGS" (Portugal, Italy, Greece and Spain), I cannot help but be reminded that, at various times in the past, each one of them occupied the envied position of most "advanced" power in this part of the world. Such a glorious past may still play an important role in terms of self-perception.

that confirmation ultimately rests on a dialectical interplay involving never-ending evaluations by peers or subordinates.

From a relatively close point of view (involving not only the question of awareness but also that of *acknowledgement* of others' status) we can formulate the hypothesis that the tendency toward ostentation is particularly marked and enduring in those settings where there is an unstable pecking order between various types of elites (or their potential challengers); hence the likelihood of symbolic duels due to the necessity to buttress one's position by repeated demonstrations. Conversely, it can be postulated that elites enjoying a consolidated position in fairly stable societies have less need for displays of face. In this respect, it would be tempting, although I think incorrect, to make a sharp contrast between status societies (where social worth is guaranteed legally) and class ones (characterised by less rigidity and increased competitiveness) – to refer to the classical Weberian distinction. In fact, historical research shows that in many “status societies”, maintaining one's prestige in order to get regular attention was something that had to be regularly striven for. Similarly, the formal recognition of (collective) privileges firmly separated noble from commoner in most of Western Europe; but in many cases, however, there was no certainty about rank at the top. This could be due to arbitrary royal nominations, the possible usurpation of titles and armorial bearings, but was also the result of conflicting criteria of superiority (related to roles and sectors – chivalry, church, etc. – in combination with the respective seniority and prestige of aristocratic families).⁹ It goes without saying that such issues can only be properly treated from a dynamic perspective and by taking account of the practices through which status is signified and cemented from generation to generation. Finally, an interesting variable that should not be neglected is the degree of concentration of elites. Here it would be worthwhile to systematically test the following hypothesis, that the smaller the proximity between elites, the greater the tendency for competitive display (royal courts constituting extreme situations) – and vice versa.

Complexity

From the arguments presented in the previous section, it could be concluded that we stand on fairly solid ground, with a few key explanatory variables identified and applicable to most cases. Structuralist assumptions regarding how social actors are likely to behave according to their respective backgrounds and the nature of the society in which they move are widespread in the relevant literature. Observable reality, however, often confounds prediction, and it is useful to remember that rigid models of interpretation fail to account for many social environments. Admittedly, more often than not in the course of history,

⁹ See, for instance, Bush (1983, Chapter V) and various contributions in Cosandey (2005).

elites have attached a lot of importance to self-affirmation and have resorted to all sorts of means liable to differentiate them. Nevertheless, from the broad perspective of the comparative analyst, the only thing we know for certain is that robust generalisations are particularly hard to come by. Historical research offers little corroboration for universal invariants in this respect and anthropology provides examples of communities discouraging any expression of superiority whatsoever. When we look at the contemporary world, clear contrasts also appear – for example, Arab versus Scandinavian societies – while many contexts are mired in ambiguity. If we take concrete modalities of social distinction into account (external signs, embodied signs, “vicarious display”, etc.), the variability in the patterns of meaning involved becomes even more obvious.

The approach advocated here aims at avoiding two specific pitfalls: the quest for universal laws, usually formulated at a high level of abstraction, and the danger of hyper-empiricism.¹⁰ Among the most recurrent themes relevant to the issue of elite (un)conspicuousness, one notably finds what I am tempted to call “the iron law of old money/new money.” This refers to a marked contrast between the understatement of long-standing elites and the supposedly boastful attitudes exhibited by those having recently acquired nobility or wealth. This is a common and well-identified pattern. Nevertheless, comparative research should caution us against inferring any sociological law from this observation. We need only turn toward the numerous counter-examples to see the reliability of this assumption put in doubt and to gain a measure of the phenomenon’s true complexity. We find instances of well-entrenched elites that remain extremely assertive, as well as instances of “new elites” which favour a very simple style. If space permitted, it would be possible to offer many concrete illustrations, but I will content myself here with hinting at a few underlying logics behind such behaviour.

In order to make sense of many attitudes falling under the first category (the ostentation of established elites), we have to go beyond standard interpretations of conspicuousness as essentially intended to impress social inferiors. We must consider instead the frequent primacy of intra-elite symbolic competition and take account of the embodiment of vertical groupings alluded to above. Enduring ostentation may, for example, be related to attitudes emphasising the virtues of largess and hospitality, to the perceived duty to live luxuriously with a view to asserting oneself with regard to other elites, but also in order to maintain tight networks of relations and clients, or even to achieve recognition at the

¹⁰ One of my overall ambitions regarding the fifteen or so available explanatory schemes dealing with the issue of social distinction has been to show that most of their conclusions should be viewed at best as “middle-range” theories, although their proponents have often presented them as universalistic propositions.

international level.¹¹ As for the second category (the modesty of social climbers), possible explanations include undertones of anxiety, a desire to be merely “respectable” without any further pretension, and so forth.¹² A particularly interesting case here is that of newcomers, whose ambition entails moderation insofar as the dominant model of their society is that of unobtrusiveness (for reasons to be discussed in the next section). The dilemma they are confronted with consists of simultaneously distinguishing themselves from those who share their origins and from “aspirational peers” (which requires that they show off their success to a certain degree), whilst conforming to the canon of restraint favoured by the established elites in order to ensure their acceptance by this group. A comparative study of this kind of situation brings numerous other important themes into play, such as the relation to “paragons” (knowing that social climbers may also bring forward alternative codes of distinction), or strategic as opposed to uncalculated attitudes, for instance.¹³ From a top-down perspective, we also find cases of “old” elites developing ever-more sophisticated forms of distinction under the pressure of newcomers who threaten to outclass them, *as well as* cases of elites loftily affirming their social supremacy by declining to compete. Likewise, distinction may involve obsessively judging others *as well as* affecting an ostentatious indifference. I know that many social scientists might be eager to posit an invariant relation of structural determination between the degree of supremacy of various upper-strata groups and their response, when challenged, in terms of fighting attitude vs. quiet assurance. As mentioned before, I remain suspicious of such blanket generalisations, as I think they obfuscate more than they clarify. I tend to think that the question of conspicuousness invites us to challenge the claims of abstract sociologism and to pay closer attention to non-negligible cultural differences.¹⁴ So does the question of unobtrusiveness that we briefly consider now.

On Unobtrusiveness

I have argued (Daloz 2010) that, with a few notable exceptions, the social theorists who took an interest in the question of social distinction tackled it as a rather subsidiary theme that tended to give way to another, more pressing con-

¹¹ A remarkable historical example is that of those Dutch patricians of the second half of the seventeenth century who realised that they could not acquire international prestige through a simple bourgeois life-style and had to adopt an aristocratic one in order to be significant on the European scene of the courtly age (see Spierenburg 1981).

¹² See, for instance, Braun (1996) and Smith (2002).

¹³ I would like to emphasise that outlining one of my themes (ostentation vs. understatement) in such an isolated way is not an easy task, given that there are numerous connections to be made between these key themes, as will be demonstrated in my forthcoming volume.

¹⁴ We need only think about the closely related issue of the dramatisation of elites as entailing concealment *or* hyper-visibility.

cern: the need to provide their grand theories with consonant explanatory schemes. As a result, explanations for what might be called the “conspicuous absence of conspicuousness” have typically taken a deductive form, simply fitting this intriguing phenomenon into existing analytical frameworks. Once again, however, I think that a truly comparative approach to the phenomenon calls for a well-considered exercise in scientific eclecticism, rather than for ubiquitous explanations. Throughout the following pages, I will look at sociological interpretations of unobtrusiveness; at works related to socio-political dynamics; and finally, at readings that are more sensitive to cultural explanations.

Sociological Interpretations

In sociology, the avoidance of conspicuous display in the upper strata of society is often interpreted as reflecting an insincere affectation; in fact, as a supreme form of social distinction. The idea is as follows: when their superiority is well institutionalised, it may be in the interest of high-ranking social actors to play the card of false humility. By not boasting about their eminent position, they seem to indicate that status differences are quite unimportant to them. To return to the classical “old/new money” theme, such an attitude may of course constitute a good way to differentiate themselves from the aggressive traits of the newly rich eager to proclaim their social worth. What is at stake here, more or less consciously, is a kind of “natural” superiority based on embodied signs (such as self-assurance, refined taste, perfect manners) in contrast to prestigious goods, which can be instantly acquired by anyone who has sufficient material resources to do so.¹⁵ This includes parvenus, who are frequently deemed ostentatious (in a clearly negative sense) and vulgar, often pointing to the fact that they have not been socialised into the same sub-culture.

False modesty may also be related to the demonstration of a relative freedom and a capacity to break with the dominant codes and expectations. An illuminating story in this regard is that of the director of a large firm who invites his main collaborators to a formal dinner but who himself appears in casual clothes, thereby instantly setting himself apart from all his “suitably” dressed guests. Here again, we come across the key role played by the pre-awareness of superior social status. If prominent members of the elite know that the people they are facing are already aware of their actual position, demonstrations of simplicity are likely to beget astonishment and may form part of a strategy of distinction. In this, the falsely modest persons seem to compel

¹⁵ Such a reading in terms of distinctive naturalness is often associated with the work of Pierre Bourdieu (1979), who insists on the apparent “grace” which characterises the members of the dominant class thanks to their habitus. It should not be forgotten, however, that this question is a very old one indeed, and has been dealt with by many authors over the centuries, especially regarding “aristocratic ease” or “sprezzatura” (see Burke 1995).

their audience to give them the respect that they apparently refuse to claim for themselves.

More commonly perhaps, unobtrusiveness involves understatement and subtle signs of distinction. Bourdieu (1979, 278) is not afraid to use the paradoxical expression "*L'ostentation de la discrétion*" for these cases. By affecting a rather "subdued" style, members of the upper strata convey an impression of self-assurance that is ostensible in its very lack of resort to outstanding hallmarks of distinction. In his study of bourgeois clothing in the nineteenth century, Perrot (1981) uses similarly fascinating oxymora, such as "ascetic luxury", "rich sobriety" and "elegant plainness" in order to express complex strategies of measured distinction (see also Le Wita 1988, on more contemporary Parisian high bourgeoisie). Nevertheless, it is far from certain that such restrained markers of class, unpretentious yet "tasteful", would make sense everywhere.¹⁶

I think that it is also important to examine other possible sociological hypotheses. What I have in mind, for instance, is the adoption of relatively modest styles as a reflection of decline in status. In this respect, the denunciation of the "vulgar excesses" of new plutocrats by the aristocracy in several European countries at the end of the nineteenth century may be interpreted as an adaptive strategy. Instead of desperately trying to "maintain" their previous splendid lifestyle, impecunious aristocrats endeavoured to impose more understated ways. Other relevant sub-themes include the topic of "honourable dissimulation" (it could behave a person below the status of a great magnate not to display wealth too conspicuously); and that of austerity as a signal of Spartan frugality (as in the case of the Prussian army). In the field, the researcher also comes across elites who invest in protecting their privacy (by living apart...) or in strategies of envy-avoidance (fear of racket...) rather than flaunting their wealth. And last, but by no means least, one must mention the effect that variables such as age and gender have on social role, with socialisation processes often resulting in certain forms of modesty (for example, an unassuming attitude being expected of young people, especially women, in many societies, even within elite families).

Socio-Political Dynamics

From a very different perspective, unobtrusiveness can also be understood as related to the constraining effect that certain political regimes have on attitudes. Many classical themes, such as that of "Republican simplicity," would

¹⁶ This is a mode of dress obviously far less conspicuous than the former aristocratic one, but durably indicative of superior wealth and taste, in contrast with more casual styles and the peasant or "folk" dress found throughout Europe at the time, which frequently exhibit a remarkable degree of densely packed ornamentation.

deserve to be examined in some detail here. Let me just draw attention to the fact that there is of course no definite correlation between ideological conceptions favouring greater political equality and the overall curbing of expressions of superiority. Cases where a quest for distinction (especially at the top of society) has coexisted with the official promotion of equality (for example in post-revolutionary systems) are not hard to come by, as we all know. Likewise, consistent appeals to the political values of citizenship and “Western-style” democracy are not incompatible with ideals of social success encouraging the endless pursuit of status affirmation. In this respect, it can be argued that the vision of society and politics developed in the “elitist” tradition (chiefly Pareto’s) has been more lucid than many others. The great merit of the revision of elite theory advocated by John Higley, sometimes referred to as “neo-elitism”, has been to retain this kind of realist conception, while paying more attention to the somewhat unprecedented position of elites within modern democratic settings.¹⁷ I will not go over the sensitive question of the tension between eminence and proximity, which I have often treated in my comparative work on elites and political representation (see, e.g. Daloz 2009, for a summary). I would rather draw attention here to the relationship between processes of democratisation and mounting pressures to avoid excessive social display.

Although several other references could be made, an important vein of thought has been the (post-)Eliasian one. According to one of its major proponents (Wouters 2007), new forms of social mixing have increasingly deprived members of socially superior groups of the precedence they had largely taken for granted. Rising levels of political correctness prohibit them from expressing arrogant feelings of self-aggrandisement as openly as before. Attempts at inflicting humiliation would become especially intolerable in this context and subject to stronger collective reprobation. At the end of the 1960s and in the 1970s, some students from upper-class backgrounds went so far as to deliberately adopt the vocabulary of the masses and affecting a working class accent. More currently relevant perhaps than such extreme demonstrations of ordinariness in the name of political conviction, what this type of approach emphasises is a growing preference for casualness and more informal manners, as well as for reduced expression of socio-psychical distance from lower-status groups.

Although it is highly interesting as a working hypothesis, it would be difficult to postulate a general process of rising “unconspicuousness” along these lines – particularly with regard to feelings of downward social identification. As Wouters himself admits, even in Western European and North American contexts, this process has at best been slow and uneven, and we need only remember that the 1980s were also the age of the highly conspicuous

¹⁷ See, notably, Field and Higley (1980); Higley and Burton (2006).

“Yuppy.”¹⁸ In fact, what is striking about the contemporary world is rather the hybrid nature of attitudes (as for example that of the “bourgeois-bohemian”) and a greater degree of confusion with regard to symbolic hierarchies; what some analysts see as characteristic of “postmodernity.”

From the ambiguities of “radical chic” (see Wolfe 1970) to the elitist renunciation of the comforts offered by modern consumerism in the name of a more sustainable lifestyle (which may of course be interpreted either in terms of unobtrusiveness or as a new way to distinguish oneself by showing foresight or awareness), many observable strategies prove to be profoundly ambivalent. Interpreting them requires inductive work aimed at deciphering contextually meaningful codes, not simply applying ready-made deductive reasoning.

Cultural Explanations

Even if the underlying sociological and political logics of unobtrusiveness are given due weight, they do not provide us with an analytical “be all and end all.” Unobtrusiveness may equally evolve from deeply engrained cultural heritages. Anthropologists, ethnologists and psycho-sociologists have often shown how, in various settings, considerable social pressure acts to exalt the position of the group rather than that of its most successful members. In this way, individuals at the top are constantly kept from stepping too far out of line and disturbing social harmony.

This by no means suggests that the question of unobtrusiveness can be understood simply in a dichotomous way, as in “collectivist” cultures emphasising low self-enhancement being contrasted with more individualistic ones driven by an endless thirst for winning images. On the contrary, a comparative approach implies that a great variety of meanings and forms have to be taken into consideration. There are wide differences between, for instance, superstitious beliefs about ostentation as liable to attract the “evil eye”; the “nothing in excess” motto dear to Greek philosophers; the Puritan ethos of temperance and frugality; Brahmanic detachment from the world based upon depriving oneself of material possessions; the type of “self-effacement-cum-enhancement-of-important-others” that one frequently encounters in Japan; or, say, the British form of understatement characterised by euphemism and self-deprecation. Behind apparently similar requirements of humility, often combined with analogous critiques of excessive display, lies in fact a wide, virtually unbounded array of motivations and cultural expressions that must be studied seriously.

The inevitable question when one examines such mentalities – especially at the elite level – is what possible explanations can there be for their genesis? In

¹⁸ For an anecdotal viewpoint on extreme forms of ostentation in the United States during the 1980s, see the essay by Taylor (1989).

my own work on the imperative of “conspicuous modesty” in Scandinavia (Daloz 2007), I proposed some nuanced interpretations. Culturalist reasoning (notably combining environmental, demographic, historical and religious dimensions) cannot be dismissed altogether, although it is relatively simple for a comparativist to highlight the limits of such approaches. Still, it is important to recognise that the realm of possible choice is constrained by the prevalent universe of meaning within which an elite lives. The same goes for more ideological factors (the diffusion through society of anti-ostentatious attitudes originating with groups such as the social-democrats and their nineteenth-century predecessors, who often came from humble backgrounds). Following Geertz (1973), my view is that culture should not necessarily be defined as a by-product of more fundamental factors. This does not mean that we should reason in terms of a primacy of Culture, only that we should be wary of approaches that systematically resort to the same structural determinants (economic, sociological or political in particular). An interesting paradox regarding “conspicuous modesty” is that the dissimulation of assets, and of any other source of distinction, may place one’s vis-à-vis in an uncomfortable position, insofar as they might underestimate the social position of the person with whom they are interacting – which is not to say that such an attitude should be understood as a convoluted way to express ascendancy.

In Conclusion

This brief discussion of conspicuousness and unobtrusiveness in the behaviour of elites has tried to hint at several dimensions of the problem. Many others could have been included. My proposed attempt at rethinking social distinction in a comparative light involves a broadened outlook and a reassessment of traditional approaches; it is still in its early stages. Such an endeavour does not imply a challenge to existing scholarship, but seeks instead to build upon the very considerable achievements of classical sociological analysis. Most models of interpretation, however, remain focused on nineteenth-/twentieth-century “Western” societies. There is a considerable risk of over-generalisation and extrapolation when it comes to interpreting societies of the past or more “exotic” places through such lenses. What is needed is a reformulation of existing theses with all the necessary nuances, and also more “decentred” approaches implying the examination of very different forms of elite distinction.

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