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# Review of Șerban Oana, Cultural Capital and Creative Communication: (Anti-)Modern and (Non-)Eurocentric Perspectives

Andreea Ioana Vlad

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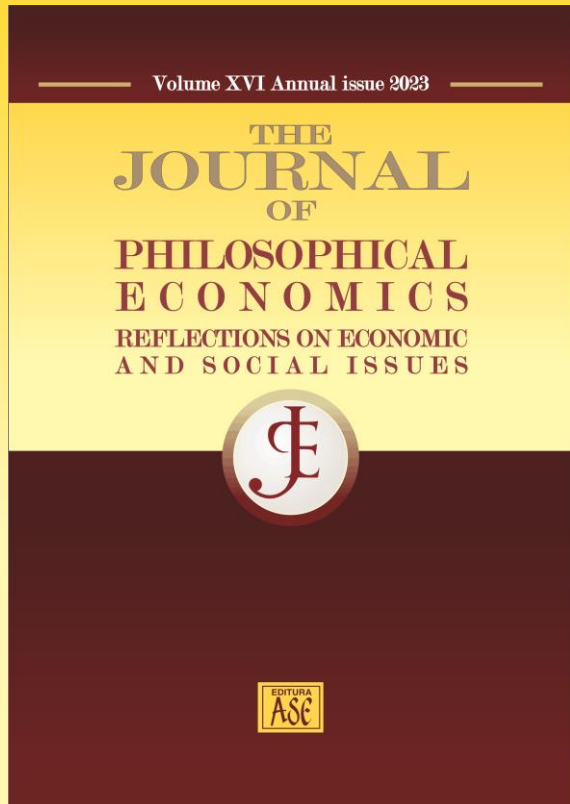
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**Review of Oana Șerban, *Cultural Capital and Creative Communication: (Anti-)Modern and (Non-)Eurocentric Perspectives*, London, New York: Routledge, 2023, hb., 90 pp., ISBN 9781032360133**

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*Andreea Ioana Vlad*

How does one evaluate a person upon a first interaction or when time is limited, and a decision has to be made regarding the other's capabilities and level of trustworthiness? Moreover, how do we decide to extend or deny group membership to another? These are the questions we are going to tackle in the discussion on *Cultural Capital and Creative Communication*, published by Oana Șerban [1] in January 2023.

According to the author, the book was designed to meet the didactic needs of M.A. students enrolled in the UNESCO programs in the Faculty of Philosophy, which include courses on cultural capital and creative communication. Therefore, it serves as a textbook, especially for students and scholars in the fields of sociology and philosophy who want to deepen their knowledge of the numerous aspects of cultural capital and its impact on social life. At the same time, I would by no means limit the target audience to academia only, as the focus of the book has a strong practical use for today's working force and for corporate communities that wish to increase their cultural capital and subsequently become more powerful and influential. Using Bourdieu's theory on forms of capital as a starting point, Oana Șerban's book not only unveils notions and definitions of cultural capital, but also tackles how it has evolved over time, how it relates to other forms of capital, such as social, human, and artistic capital, and the ways through which it reproduces itself. Furthermore, the book presents some of the main critical theories related to capital and capitalism by integrating an interdisciplinary

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approach, combining philosophy, sociology, and aesthetics, showing their layering relationship with culture and art.

This book provides a clear definition of cultural capital, and then examines the genealogy and taxonomy of Bourdieu's capital forms. It then analyses the limitations of Bourdieusian theory and demystifies the Marxist and non-Marxist aspects of his understanding of capital, paving the way for a broader discussion of capital versus capitalism, focusing on where the two might come from and how they differ. The book then deals with the cultural contradictions of capitalism and uses Daniel Bell's lens to explain the tensions between dominant cultures and those that arise in response. We can see a parallel between the culture of disillusionment and the so-called end of ideology, as captured by the paradigm of the 'aberrant decade' of the 1950s in France (before the 1968 revolution).

Towards its midpoint, the book devotes a chapter to European-centric modes of operation in relation to modernity and capital(ism), covering Max Weber's and Fernand Braudel's arguments about the origins of capitalism as a starting point, then comparing European notions of capitalism and its history with Asian ones. After establishing some of the differences between European and Asian political economies, Oana Șerban then uses Fernand Braudel's theory of cultural capital and illustrates his vision of historical dynamics as structures, referring to his plan for the Museum of the Mediterranean World.

In its second half, the book delves into how arts contribute to the development of a society and to its cultural capital. Covering the definition of artistic capital provided by Gilles Lipovetsky and Jean Serroy and drawing connections to Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello's theory of the four types of capitalism, the author manages to expand on the four ages of artistic capitalism. The book ends on the matter of deaestheticization, proposing a set of arguments for considering it as a capitalistic artistic phenomenon. Apart from the final evaluation proposed at the end of the book, the readers will find that each chapter offers a series of engaging exercises that require going beyond descriptive answers and employing critical thinking to verify the acquired understanding of each theme presented in the manual.

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Oana Șerban defines cultural capital as the ‘cluster of social assets that an individual has and uses, in order to promote social mobility and communication’ (p. 4) in a vertical society. The term encompasses social behaviour, various practises, etiquette, certain beliefs, values, and tastes, all of which are passed down from a community (or communities) to an individual over time.

In relation to the types of cultural capital that are used in social interactions, the book explores in depth Bourdieu’s threefold categorisation. The first type refers to the embodied state, which is any long-lasting disposition of the mind and body, be it natural or acquired over time. The second kind is the objectified state, in the form of cultural goods. Finally, the third is the institutionalized state, in the form of cultural competences, such as a diploma that attests to certain academic credentials and qualifications.

Bearing in mind this categorisation, perhaps one of the most important matters that *Cultural Capital and Creative Communication* manages to convey is how pervasive cultural capital proves to be in our day-to-day life, even without our realising. Let us take the example of a watch. Today, wearing a wristwatch can be seen as nothing short of redundant – if we wish to tell the time, most of us can simply use our phones. But a watch does more than just tell the time and it is not purchased or gifted entirely for utility reasons. It can embody the particular tastes and personality traits of a person, it shows their preference of a brand (and what that preference says about them), not to mention the status symbol that it conveys. However, as Kraaykamp and Eijck (2010, p. 211) would point out, the ability to understand the symbolic value of a watch hinges on one’s own embodied cultural capital. In other words, strictly socially speaking, something is valuable only as long as the other person can decode and interpret it correctly, i.e., in a positive way.

As Oana Șerban points out, for Bourdieu, it is reductive to think that economic capital is the only one that makes the world go round, given that there are other – non-economic – forms of exchange which heavily contribute, and can lead to profit. For example, domestic education plays a significant part in the upbringing of any child and their academic achievements, all the while building the foundation of the future adult who will carry, replicate, and recognise in others even at a subconscious level what cultural clusters they were exposed to.

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In attempting to define a rich cultural domestic education, we tend to refer to a childhood where books, trips to museums or to the theatre, and travelling are part of normal life. Furthermore, Bourdieu's claim is that families that can provide children with knowledge, objects, experiences, and activities that prepare and socialise the individual to replicate what *good society* values ultimately help individuals to continue to reproduce the cultural capital they were given and further develop it. This is why money alone cannot instantly buy cultural capital: it takes time to accumulate and nurture it. However, economic capital coupled with the right knowledge and the right social connections can maximise one's natural dispositions and help improve where one lacks them.

Of course, there are limitations to Bourdieu's views, and Oana Şerban brings to light two of the main issues associated with his theories on cultural capital. For the French sociologist, one's inherited cultural background will affect their academic achievements in an almost deterministic way. However, when we problematise the relationship between academic performance and cultural capital, we start noticing how there is not enough substantial research to account for a valid positive correlation between the two (p. 7). As Kingston also points out, the cultural signals that are valued in society are arbitrary, and there are simply too many variables that make up the criteria revolving around cultural capital and implicitly what academic success even entails, rendering it an ambiguous concept with questionable applicability (Kingston 2001, p. 90). The second issue that Oana Şerban addresses regarding Bourdieusian theories is that, because educational systems are responsible for reproducing social structures, it is not that cultural capital is simply passed down hereditarily and hence children perform better in school, but that any investment made by a family will prove to be a source of social profit (p. 8).

At the same time, I find that in establishing how cultural capital is reproduced and passed down through Bourdieu's lens, *Cultural Capital and Creative Communication* prompts the reader to reevaluate their views on meritocracy and how cultural capital affects social inequalities – not to mention that it does not necessarily have to be applied only when it comes to academics. I have mentioned how the book can be successfully utilised by students and scholars, as well as by corporate communities in order to have a better idea of how to

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handle the ‘the games of society’, as Bourdieu (1986, p. 241) calls them. For example, when applying for a job at a new company, they must convey through their past work experience and through their values that they are in accordance with the mission and principles, and consequently that they are fit for the job.

In relation to this, aware of some of the limitations posed by Bourdieu’s theory, Lamont and Lareau add that cultural capital is defined as an institutionalised set of ‘high status cultural signals (attitudes, preferences, formal knowledge, behaviours, goods and credentials) used for social and cultural *exclusion*’ (Lamont and Lareau 1988, p. 156, emphasis added), be it either in terms of fewer job opportunities, fewer resources, or denied membership to high status groups. For there to be a dominant group, there must be a group of those who are excluded from the competition when it comes to what we define as desirable, respectable, or prestigious – in other words, what constitutes ‘legitimate culture’ (ibidem). Therefore, being able to exclude others on the basis of cultural capital confers a certain symbolic power.

When reading Bourdieu’s writings on cultural capital, it is tempting to ponder if his theories can be interpreted as Marxist. I appreciate that this book includes a section that debunks what is Marxist and what is not Marxist in Bourdieu’s conception of cultural capital. One of the main differences in the two approaches to capital lies in their focus (pp. 12-13). For Marx, what matters is the economy of goods and the issue of ownership, whereas for Bourdieu what matters is the economy of practices and their profitable use, which can give individuals an advantage in a competitive society. At the same time, the book acknowledges that there is a general lack of consensus on the claim that cultural capital could be seen as an extension of the economic one as Marx defined it. This is also the view of Desan (2013), who explains at length why Bourdieu’s understanding of capital is incompatible with Marx’s and why he does *not*, in fact, transcend Marxist notions of capital.

Additionally, we tend to focus on Western ideas of capitalism, but we rarely stop and wonder what made western capitalism possible in the first place, especially in comparison to Asia. Using Braudel’s and Weber’s remarks on capitalism, the book brings to light the possible origins of this economic system, then parallels Europe with China, offering insights on the political contexts

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which led to a society 'based on business dynasties and a monopoly of power' in the case of the former and one that has stood under the 'exigencies of a hyper-controlled economy' in the case of the latter (p. 37).

Toward the second half of the book, the reader can see not just how art reflects culture, but also how it contributes and supports 'political liberation, adversary cultures and consumption patterns of artistic production and distribution' (p. 24). There are, for example, charted connections between experimentalism and Impressionism, ideals of liberation captured by Cubism and other modern artistic movements that find expression in what the world is experiencing.

Moreover, the book brings aestheticism and de-aestheticization into focus as strong participants in the social stage of today's cultural capital. When we think of the former, we probably think of Oscar Wilde's 'Art for art's sake' motto that promoted an intellectual and artistic movement that stripped art of its didactic motives that had been more or less always a part of art. When it comes to aestheticism, the claim is that art exists only to please the beholder – therefore, has hedonistic implications – and does not have to disseminate moral teachings (Quintus 1980).

To what degree Wilde succeeds in writing a story devoid of morals is a different matter, but in relation to his ideal, what is relevant is the series of questions that the book poses on capitalist art, its relationship to individual liberties, lack of transparency, to hedonistic inclinations and to behaviour and consumption patterns when viewing life and our existence as a form of art itself (p. 48). Here is one of the chapters where we see Oana Șerban's expertise on aestheticism shine through, as she provides an overview of artistic capitalism, employing Gilles Lipovestky and Jean Serroy's definition and insights on the four stages of artistic capitalism.

By revealing liberty and authenticity as two of the main tenets of artistic capitalism in the current capitalistic age, we notice how the (post-)modern individual has to grapple with finding and constructing his identity in a society where notions of ethics that keep hedonism at bay are seen as inhibitors of the true self (p. 53). As Oana Șerban puts it, 'modernism [...] reconsiders morality as a set of inherited values that keep individuals away from their sensitive and authentic relationship with liberty' (p. 23). Additionally, in the search for



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personal authenticity and emancipation from pre-set constraints, we see tendencies that encourage individualism coupled with a constant desire for the 'new', indicative of a preference towards instantaneous gratification: 'nowadays we have an indestructible appetite for the new. It does not matter what the new looks like' (p. 25), because something newer will appear and absorb the old *new* anyways.

In this context, I add that trying to define and replicate cultural capital becomes increasingly difficult. Kraaykamp and Eijck (2010, p. 215) show that the transmission of institutionalised cultural capital is actually becoming weaker from one generation to the next, irrespective of the educational background and cultural behaviour of parents. As the social foundation of taste has become thinner, we notice that what is praiseworthy, be in terms of fashion, of how one presents themselves, of what literature one consumes and so on, is now a matter of opinion. This is due to

the increased influence of media exposure, the professionalization and increasing differentiation of the labor market, the overall mobility that makes social networks more unstable and fluid, and growing consumerism' (ibidem).

Another facet the book explores is the anti-market nature of capitalism, showcasing it as a stage where the leading actor is freedom of choice, but where the backstage workers dictate what that freedom looks like (p. 35). It is no secret that nobody likes ads, especially since they have become so hard to avoid. Therefore, advertisements have to become more disruptive, quirker, and wittier, so as to appeal to as many potential consumers as possible without appearing as if that were the aim. In order to do that, the product that is being sold has to be attractive, it has to come with a story that resonates, impresses and inspires consumers. In her book, Oana Șerban successfully exhibits how art is articulated into new forms, allowing itself to be used as an instrument for more than just moralizing its audience, for more than just carrying political messages or social forms of expression, but also to stimulate consumerism and engage with the client.

While we experience a crisis of values and a constant need to press 'refresh', an inclination towards the *anti* becomes more and more apparent, making room for the *anti*-art phenomenon, where, in democratising art, everybody can be an artist. After having been suppressed for so long, art finds fluid outlets of

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expression, thus transcending the borders between artwork and viewer, inviting the spectator to partake into the artwork (p. 69).

We have established that a modern piece of art is constantly made and remade; its value does not lie in its final perfect form, but in the process leading up to it and in the one that succeeds it. It naturally follows then that if the individual is a piece of art themselves, then they too have to undergo the same process. Consequently, the book frames deconstruction as a prerequisite for finding one's place in society (p. 24). I find this a relevant point of discussion for understanding current social trends and issues that especially younger people are experiencing, and even for filling in the gaps of some generational conflicts, since the book covers so well why it has become increasingly difficult to lead a unitary, balanced, and coherent life.

Finally, blending both theoretical knowledge and practical examples, bringing together such a variety of standpoints on the subject of Bourdieusian theories on cultural capital, and showing its intricate relationship to artistic capital, *Cultural Capital and Creative Communication* proves to be the only one of its kind out there. I find that the book follows a logical and integrative structure, so that by the end readers get a clear overview of the newly introduced elements, how they are instrumentalised by other researchers and how they operate together. Although I would not recommend this as an introductory reading to capitalism or aesthetics, I think the book provides valuable and relevant insights on the matter of inequalities, social expression in art, and consumerism for any reader.

## Endnotes

[1] Oana Șerban is a titular professor of the Department of Practical Philosophy and History of Philosophy and of the UNESCO Chair in Interculturality, Good Governance and Sustainable Development at the University of Bucharest (Romania). She is also the Executive Director of CCIIF – The Research Center for the History and Circulation of Philosophical Ideas at the same university.

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## Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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Andreea Ioana Vlad is a philologist and a member of the Research Center for the History and Circulation of Philosophical Ideas, University of Bucharest (Romania) ([andreea-ioana.vlad@s.unesco-chair.unibuc.ro](mailto:andreea-ioana.vlad@s.unesco-chair.unibuc.ro)).