



Universitat  
Pompeu Fabra  
Barcelona

Treball de fi de màster de Recerca

# Communicating Class: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Omnivorous Cultural Consumption

Valerie Alexis Slaughter

**Màster:** Lingüística Teòrica i Aplicada

**Edició:** 2017-2018

**Directors:** Dr. Teun van Dijk

**Any de defensa:** 2018

**Col·lecció:** Treballs de fi de màster

**Departament de Traducció i Ciències del Llenguatge**

## **Abstract**

Although severe class inequality persists in America, explicit awareness of class has dissolved and class has become more “individualized,” implicitly encoded in identity through practice. Cultural taste is one such practice in which class is encoded. Recent sociological research has found that high-status individuals are “omnivorous” cultural consumers, in that they consume both high- and low- status goods, with an orientation characterized by tolerance, openness, and curiosity. While it would seem that this mode of consumption is more “democratic” or “egalitarian,” omnivorousness has in fact only shifted the system of values associated with high-status consumption. Now, elite status is signified through an (apparent) disregard for status, and “traits” associated with omnivorousness (openness) are understood to hold inherent moral value (with disregard for how these traits are produced by a high-status upbringing), while those do not possess these traits are excluded because of their “intolerance” or lack of curiosity. This study examines the way omnivorous values are embedded in and expressed through discourse by analyzing underlying sociocognitive models.

**Keywords:** critical discourse analysis, sociocognitive approach, ideology, orientation, classism, taste, omnivorousness, United States

## Table of Contents

<b>1. Introduction</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>2. Sociopolitical Context</b>	<b>4</b>
2.1 Classlessness in America	4
2.2 Meritocracy in Democracy	5
<b>3. Theoretical Framework</b>	<b>6</b>
3.1 Taste	6
3.1.1 Taste-making	6
3.1.2 Taste and social reproduction	7
3.2 Omnivorousness	8
3.2.1 Liking the same things differently	8
3.2.2 Democracy as distinction	10
3.2.3 Horizontal Boundary Drawing	10
3.3 Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)	11
3.4 In summary	12
<b>4. Corpus</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>5. Methodology</b>	<b>17</b>
5.1 An analysis of omnivorousness	17
5.2 Limitations: critiques of CDA	19
<b>6. Analysis and Discussion</b>	<b>20</b>
6.1 Meats known and unknown	21
6.2 Self-presentation	22
6.3 Pronouns: us v. them	24
6.4 Norms and values: curiosity and confidence	25
6.5 Habits and class	27
6.6 Preferences	28
6.7 In contrast: non-omnivores in action	29
<b>7. Conclusion</b>	<b>30</b>
<b>Works Cited</b>	<b>33</b>



## 1. Introduction

Published in the New York Times on July 11, 2017, David Brooks' essay, "How We Are Ruining America," posited that "informal social barriers" are more important than "structural barriers" in "segregat[ing] the lower 80 percent" from the upper-middle-class. He elaborates that these barriers include knowledge of the right "barre techniques," "baby carrier[s]," "podcast, food truck, tea, wine and Pilates tastes" in addition to the "right attitudes" about "David Foster Wallace, child-rearing, gender norms and intersectionality." This list, along with a story in which a high-school educated friend of Brooks is unable to recognize Italian cured meats such as "sopressata" and "capicola," led to backlash in the form of 3223 (mostly negative) comments on the NYT website and an eruption of parodies on twitter and online magazines. Taken together, these texts create a corpus useful for understanding how Americans read and construct class difference from the bottom-up.

Many responses deride Brooks for his snobbishness, calling him "snooty," "condescending," and "buffoonishly elitist," "insufferably elitist," and "breathtakingly arrogant." Commenters argue that they too are unsure of what sopressata and capicola are, and that while they might meet financial standards to qualify as a part of the upper-middle-class, they do not participate in, or are alienated by, or do not believe in the existence of the silly, "pretentious" signifiers Brooks enumerates. While it is tempting to read this denunciation of snobbery and finicky class signifiers as the ultimate expression of the democratic ideal (no snobs allowed!), these comments in fact reveal a shifted notion of value. America has long conceived of itself as a classless society, and those in the cultural-know couch status (as everything else) in the vocabulary of democracy. The modern elite sensibility refuses eliteness. (One woman writes: "everyone knows that the real art of being part of the educated class comes from making fun of people who do Pilates," implying that those who accept elite culture uncritically are the real rubes.) Tolerance, openness, interest in, and validation of cultures not classically affiliated with the elite is the new measure of status. The anti-snob does not accept intolerance— from above or below. Just as commenters critique Brooks for his snobbery, they criticize his friend for her "incuriosity." The *incurious* here must serve as the lower-class complement of a *snob*: closed, intolerant.

This paper examines how this shift in vocabulary, while apparently more tolerant, continues to reproduce classist ideology, simply shifting the measurement of eliteness. The expression of “omnivorous” tastes (the omnivore consumes both “high” and “low” culture with seemingly no regard for its legitimacy) simultaneously indicates the commenter’s position in the dominant class while enforcing their particular system of values as the “ranking principle” in determining class.

## **2. Sociopolitical Context**

### *2.1 Classlessness in America*

The question of class was brought to the fore with the 2016 American presidential election, which marked the start of a yet-unfinished identity crisis as many Americans reckoned with the sudden vocality of a monolithic and seemingly-never-before-considered “white working-class,” widely held to be responsible for Donald Trump’s unexpected win. These were “the forgotten people” Trump addressed in his victory speech, who were mysteriously unaccounted for in pre-election polls, and who Trump promised would be “forgotten no longer.” Thus, following the election, Americans who had long imagined themselves to be living in a mythologically classless country (Lamont 1992), found themselves talking about class and slew of think-pieces emerged in the days following the election considering the biases, predilections, and aspirations of the “white working-class.” This reckoning has provided a unique opportunity to examine how Americans perceive and perpetuate class hierarchy.

Modern class distinctions are not usually framed quite so explicitly. Bottero (2004: 38) argues that class-consciousness has “individualized process of hierarchical distinction” in which “explicit identification and awareness dissolve,” and class is instead “implicitly encoded in identity through practice” In the absence of “class,” hierarchies are formed by taste.

Although severe class inequalities persist, class consciousness is no longer a feature of contemporary class relations (Bottero 2004). Qualitative research has shown that while people are able to discuss class as an abstract “political” issue, they are reluctant to claim specific class identities for themselves. Bottero cites Savage’s study (2000) wherein interviewees tended to “refuse” class identity, stressing their own “ordinariness,” as a way (Savage speculates) of

“repudiating the entire ‘class’ discourse altogether.” When interviewees did identify their membership to a particular class, this identification was “contextual and of limited significance, rather than being a major source of identity and group belonging.” While some theorists have claimed that this lack of explicit class identity marks “the death of class” (Bauman, 1992), Savage (and Bottero) argue that

The structural importance of class to people’s lives appears not to be recognized by the people themselves. Culturally, class does not appear to be a self-conscious principle of social identity. Structurally, however, it appears to be highly pertinent (36).

Bottero (2004) traces the the dwindling importance of class identity, pointing to a larger theoretical shift in the perception of class as “cultural, individualized, and implicit” rather than “collective, explicit, and oppositional.” The “individualization” of class does not entail a “death of class,” but rather a shift in how class operates. While collective class identities are weak, “people continue to define their own individual identities in ways which inevitably involve relational comparisons with members of various social classes” and class cultures have been reformed “around individualized axes” (Savage, 2000: xii). In fact, as Skeggs (1997) points out, the “recent invisibility” of class suggests that “these differences are now institutionalized, legitimated and well established’ (7). The outcomes of inequality cause feelings of shame and moral failure, but inequality itself is unquestioned, rendered “invisible” and “uninteresting.”

## *2.2 Meritocracy in Democracy*

America is famously purported to be a classless society, where “individual liberty” (“the freedom to get ahead and make something of yourself”) is equated with “societal equality” (Bottero 2004). Fundamental to this conception of egalitarianism is the American Dream: the idea that anyone can get ahead if they “work hard,” and that “merit” is always rewarded. Critically points out, the discourse of meritocracy positivizes inequality, framing the reproduction of inequalities as the result of a just, “fair, and free” competition. The relative “merit” of any individual can encompass formal qualifications as well as “a measure of the specific inner qualities” (Jackson 2007: 368). Finally, because what is meritorious is determined by context (there is no single trait which is inherently meritorious), “the application of meritocratic systems relies on agreement as

to what constitutes merit, and how to measure it” (Sliwa 2014: 30). Merit is thus socially-constructed and dynamic, and with an orientation of “omnivorousness,” defined by openness and curiosity.

### **3. Theoretical Framework**

This section sets out to specify the relationship between omnivorous consumption and the reproduction of hierarchy. I will begin by exploring the role of social class in forming taste and the importance of taste in (re)producing class hierarchy. I will then describe how shifting values have redefined “high-status” culture exploring the boundaries created in the omnivorous attitude. I will end with a (brief) overview of Critical Discourse Analysis to highlight its specific ability to excavate those boundaries.

#### *3.1 Taste*

##### *3.1.1 Taste-making*

In his landmark 1984 work, *Distinction*, Bourdieu defines “capital” as the “set of actually usable powers and resources” available to an individual (114), identifying two “species” of capital: economic and cultural. While economic capital is relatively straightforward (money, income), Bourdieu is primarily preoccupied with cultural or “embodied” capital, a set of culturally-specific “competence[s]” that function as “resource[s]” or “power” in particular social settings. Because these competences are “inculcated” through family and education, they are defined by and defining of class (Weininger 2005, Bourdieu 1984: 28).

Bourdieu argues that groups within society possess varying quantities and combinations of economic and cultural capital. The combined measure of capital divides society into the “dominant” group, those with high economic and cultural capital: industrialists, executives, professors, and the “dominated,” those with low economic and cultural capital: manual and farm laborers. It is worth noting that these groups are not determined by “theoretically specified” boundaries. Bourdieu advocates for a more “continuous” model of the “social space,” in which the volume, composition, and mobility of one’s capital are mapped “three-dimensionally,” and through their location, are associated with a particular “style of life” (Weininger 2005: 122).

One's life experiences are implicitly informed by class position and culminate in a particular "system of dispositions," perceptions, and appreciations, which Bourdieu refers to as "habitus." Habitus allows individuals to "apprehend...elements [of a particular situation] as meaningful, and to pursue—typically without reflection or calculation—a course of action which is 'appropriate' to it" (Weininger 2005: 125). While habitus is applied broadly across many domains, its most noteworthy manifestation (according to Bourdieu) is in *taste*.

### *3.1.2 Taste and social reproduction*

As an informal, practical knowledge, taste is often considered to be "elective and socially inconsequential," (95), but taste is such a potent recourse for reproducing social hierarchy "precisely because its political consequence is routinely misrecognized as disinterested practice" (Holt 1997: 94). "Taste," Bourdieu (1984) writes, "classifies and it classifies the classifier" (40), which is to say that taste simultaneously asserts one's own position in the social space, while reinforcing the taxonomy which marks taste as a legitimate status-marker (6).

Critics of Bourdieu have problematized the idea that taste differences entail exclusion or hierarchization. It has been argued that in order for taste to function as "an exclusionary resource," the superiority of elite tastes must be widely acknowledged, and the symbolic hierarchy consciously defended (Lamont 1992). Bourdieu emphasizes, however, that exclusionary consumption practices typically occur through the disinterested pursuit of tastes rather than explicit strategic maneuvering (Bourdieu 1984: 172-173). It is vital to his conception of habitus that while it unifies practice at both an individual and group level, it is a practical knowledge rather than a conscious one (Holt 1997: 95). Bourdieu invokes the image of "a conductorless orchestra," stressing that such practices maintain "regularity, unity, and systematicity" without conscious coordination (Bourdieu 1990: 59).

These social reproductive mechanisms are parallel to Gramsci's conception of hegemony, wherein relations of domination are maintained through consent rather than coercion (Gramsci 1971). Dominant social classes reproduce the social structure in accord with their interests not because their values are adopted across society, but because "they are able to articulate commonsensical ways of understanding class differences such that their potential antagonism is

neutralized.” Elites set the terms through which tastes are assigned moral and social value (Holt 1997: 95), even if they do so unknowingly.

Social practices do not merely “express” the schemes which comprise the habitus: to appreciate a certain type of music is, implicitly or explicitly, to spurn other available forms. The “aesthetic sensibility that orients actors everyday choices” serves as a vehicle through which actors symbolize their social similarity with and social difference from one another (Bourdieu 1984: 56). Through the minutiae of everyday consumption, in other words, each individual continuously classifies him and herself, and simultaneously all others as alike or different (Holt 1997).

### *3.2 Omnivorousness*

#### *3.2.1 Liking the same things differently*

Peterson (1992, 1996, 1997) tracks a shift in the orientation of high-status individuals away from “snobbish” exclusion, and toward a more inclusive range of cultural preferences which traverse the high/low divide in a phenomenon he calls “omnivorous” consumption. In the era of the omnivore, high-status is not marked through the exclusive consumption of legitimated highbrow genres, but instead through an interest in and knowledge of cultural forms of all kinds, marked by an “an openness to appreciating everything” (Peterson and Kern, 1996: 94). Omnivorousness redefines the criterion for drawing symbolic boundaries to include range: it's not just what you like, but the variousness of the things you like (Lizardo and Skiles, 2012; 2015). This marks the “the emergence of a new cultural logic of distinction” (Goldberg 2011).

Jarness (2015) points to the importance of considering not just “the whats of cultural consumption” (different genres of consumption) but also the “hows of cultural consumption.” Jarness emphasizes Bourdieu’s (1984) point that

[I]n the absence of the conditions of material possession, the pursuit of exclusiveness has to be content with developing a unique mode of appropriation. Liking the same things differently, liking different things, less obviously marked out for admiration (282).

If Peterson sets out to illustrate that high-status consumers like the “different things, less obviously marked out for admiration” (i.e. low-brow goods), Jarness explores how high-status

consumers like “the same things” (goods that might be considered either high- or low- brow) “differently.”

Jarness (2015) criticizes “crude” measurements of omnivorousness which relies on the *a priori* clustering of tastes into “brow categories” (high-, middle-, low-). Drawing on qualitative interviews, Jarness identifies four “modes” of consumption, stressing that high cultural capital consumers deploy a “knowing, reflexive, and somewhat playful mode of consumption” (359). Holt (1997) criticizes studies which rely on “consumption objects,” arguing that the postmodern condition has seen the breakdown in the hierarchy distinguishing legitimate “high” culture from mass “low” culture (103). Differences in cultural capital are no longer determined by “objects” consumed, but by a disposition characterized by “openness” with which high cultural capital consumers approach those objects.

According to Bourdieu, the habitus of the dominant class centered is around “a sense of distinction,” characterized by an overriding aesthetic sensibility which prizes the subordination of function to form. Holt (1997) elaborates that while low cultural capital consumers (LCC) appreciate what is “functional” or “practical,” high cultural capital consumers (HCC) take the material value of cultural objects for granted, and for them, taste becomes a realm of self-expression or a means of constructing reality. While LCCs value “material abundance” and “luxury,” HCCs value “metaphysical aspects of life,” and “absolve” themselves of materialism (Holt 1997: 103). This sensitivity to and system for “aestheticization” can be applied to “the most everyday choices of everyday life,” making even the most functional and ordinary “tastes” (“cooking, dress, or decoration”) markers of class status (Bourdieu 1984: 40).

Lizardo and Skiles (2012) similarly argue that omnivorousness arises out of “cumulative advantage:” high-status individuals have much more regular exposure to various forms of cultural consumption at home and school and this equips them with the tools (and confidence) to engage in this aestheticization. As this abstract scheme of perception and appreciation of symbolic goods has become the most “legitimate orientation” across a wide range of fields. This dynamic results, for instance, in specifiable institutional penalties for those who cannot produce this flexible deployment of the aestheticizing scheme and thus appear as “intolerant” or “exclusionary” of other cultures and styles, producing systemic coordination between particular

disposition and institutionalized discourses. Holt (1997) points out that what he terms “high cultural capital” (HCC) careers are characterized by an emphasis on symbolic analysis, the necessity to synthesize and manipulate information, to understand and respond to new situations, to innovate rather than follow rote instructions.

### *3.2.2 Democracy as distinction*

Johnston and Baumann explore this idea in their paper, “Democracy versus Distinction” (2007). They argue that omnivorousness is characterized by the tension between the overt expression of an inclusive democratic ideology “organized around normative liberal principles of human equality and meritocracy” and the more covert encoding of an exclusive ideology of “distinction,” which is a “reformulation” of the snobbish suggestion that only certain people are capable of appreciating art (171). As Holt (1997) points out, “egalitarian values are held in such esteem in the United States,” that “to harshly scorn the tastes of others is considered a vulgar practice (declassé), a parochial attitude of the less cultured as opposed to the cultural relativism that signifies American elites” (107). Thus expressing a democratic (or in Holt’s vocabulary, “egalitarian”) ideology is itself a means of expressing distinction.

Johnston and Baumann’s “ideology of distinction” is the modern expression of class difference, wherein class is not determined by money but by taste. In a society predicated on egalitarianism, this ideology can only be expressed in “individualistic, meritocratic language.” Distinction is thus emphasized through individual tastes and lifestyles and the collective “underpinnings of high-status cultural forms are not readily transparent” (170). Ollivier (2008) stresses that “openness to cultural diversity *builds on* rather than displaces older categories of high and mass culture in which it remains thoroughly embedded” (120).

### *3.2.3 Horizontal Boundary Drawing*

Lizardo and Skiles (2012) posit that one important function of this disposition is not to distinguish the dominant class from the dominated, but to distinguish the dominated faction of the dominant class (those with relatively less economic capital, but higher cultural capital, e.g.

professors, artists) from the dominant faction of the dominant class (e.g. doctors, lawyers). This “horizontal boundary drawing” is an exercise in status-group differentiation, in which each group seeks to identify what the “dominant-ranking principle” should be in determining status (socio-economic, socio-political, cultural), arguing in favor of the currency their group deals most effectively in. Because those with higher cultural capital not only engage in the aestheticization of “everyday” objects, but are also more inclined to express a taste for “nonstandard art objects” or genres or forms which had yet to be legitimized, they differentiate themselves from the economically dominant faction by expressing a more “nuanced” taste.

Jarness (2017) similarly tracked the attitudinal differentiation of the culturally privileged fraction of the higher-status class from the economically-privileged fraction, and vice versa. He finds that the economic fraction is bitter toward “the cultural elite” (i.e. “snobs”) as the culturally-privileged fraction is toward “the rich” (i.e. the tasteless “bourgeoisie”). Lizardo and Skiles point out that “snobbery, traditionally defined in the sociology of taste as liking only legitimated goods, has come to be seen as an indication of late acquisition of the aesthetic disposition” because such conservatism, or intolerance would indicate that the individual’s exposure to culture came perhaps only through education.

### *3.3 Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)*

As a transposable system of dispositional schemes, omnivorousness cannot be directly observed, but must be apprehended interpretively. In his writings on Critical Discourse Analysis, Fairclough (2001) stresses the importance of discourse to (Bourdieuian<sup>1</sup>) social practices. When people engage in social activities, they not only use discourse in a particular way (i.e. the language of a shop assistant versus that of lumberjack), but they ongoingly generate discursive representations of other practices, as well as “reflexive” representations of their own practice. This is to say: practices not only contain discursive elements, but discourse surrounding practice, and differentiating one practice from other practices is a part of practice itself. Discourse

---

<sup>1</sup> Fairclough does not explicitly invoke Bourdieu’s idea of “habitus,” but he does describe “habitualized ways, tied to particular times and places in which people apply resources (material or symbolic) to act together in the world.”

structures surrounding taste provide what Fairclough calls the “semiotic point of entry” for the excavation of underlying cognitive structures which inform omnivorous consumption.

It is the aim of Critical Discourse Analysis not only to investigate, but to “describe, explain, and critique” the reproduction of dominance in discourse, and how such discourses “influence such socially shared knowledge, attitudes and ideologies, namely through their role in the manufacture of concrete models” (van Dijk 1993: 283). Van Dijk’s sociocognitive approach emphasizes the cognitive mediation inherent in the relationship between discourse and society, because “language users not only act, but also think when they do so” (van Dijk 2009: 64).

Van Dijk (1998) links specific discourse structures to underlying ideologies, which he defines as “the basis of the social representations shared by members of a group” (8). Ideologies influence and determine attitudes (or orientations) and affect the “mental models” of individuals. A “mental model” is a partial and subjective cognitive representation of some aspect of the world (van Dijk 1985). Concisely mapping the interaction of these components, van Dijk writes: “the polarized and categorical structure of underlying ideologies also characterizes social attitudes, which in turn influence personal mental models and opinions that finally are expressed and reproduced by discourse” (84). It is the task of CDA to make obvious the discursive structures which are used in the reproduction and the commonsensicalization of hierarchy.

### *3.4 In summary*

Hegemonic social relations are reproduced through the (unintended) consequences of everyday interaction. Differences between social groups manifest in classification systems which are produced and reproduced (in part) discursively. Such discursive representations of taste constitute what Bourdieu (1984) refers to as “a forgotten dimension of the class struggle” (483).

Taste, Bourdieu argues, arises out of one’s life experience and is thus informed by class (among other things). Such classification of taste and lifestyles differences has become the primary site where class struggle takes place. According to Bourdieu, social groups attempt to express proximity to “legitimate” culture. However, recent research has shown that “omnivorous” taste, particularly characterized by a “playful” openness to and interest in both (typically) canonical and non-canonical culture, has become the most potent signifier of status.

This is to say that “legitimacy” or high-status is now conveyed through expressing openness to and interest in seemingly illegitimate culture.

This stance, in which good “taste” is not established through liking a particular thing, but through a reflexive openness toward liking many things, paradoxically depends on expressing egalitarian sentiments, and simultaneously encoding that one’s egalitarian sentiments are a form of distinction within themselves. Consumers with an omnivorous orientation classify themselves as open, curious, bold, in contrast to the other as closed, incurious, timid. Vivaly, omnivores are anti-snobs, which they express through a privileged indifference toward canonical or institutionalized valuations of legitimacy.

Discourse structures surrounding taste provide what Chouliaraki and Fairclough (1999) call the “semiotic point of entry” for critical discourse analysts to excavate underlying cognitive structures which inform omnivorous consumption (14). Underlying, socially shared prejudices and ideologies are “expressed in” (or “control”) discourse, and thus can be understood through the analysis of discourse. The omnivorous orientation can be understood as arising out of the tension between ideologies of “democracy” and “distinction.”

#### **4. Corpus**

##### *How We Are Ruining America*

David Brooks’s article hit a nerve with liberals and conservative (although, clearly, liberals more than conservatives), garnering 3223 comments on the New York Times website, “topping the Times’s Most Emailed list” (Moore, 2017), and spurring the publication of many parodies, and articles with titles like “David Brooks: the reason for inequality is uneducated people can’t order fancy sandwiches” (from Vox) and “Heroic Columnist Saves Uneducated Friend From Embarrassing Meal at Sandwich Restaurant” (from Eater). As an unapologetically conservative columnist for a left-leaning paper, Brooks’ columns have been the source of much internet-wide outrage, but this response was particularly emphatic. What is it about the article that elicited such a response?

Brooks begins the article with a discussion of the structural barriers which perpetuate inequality: that upper-middle-class parents have the means to more time with their children (and

more money on college admissions) than “less affluent parents,” that residential zoning restrictions segregate the “well-educated” from the “poor and less educated.” However, he writes, these structural barriers are ultimately “less important than the informal social barriers that segregate the lower 80 percent,” before segueing into the sandwich anecdote (an instance of one such barrier):

Recently I took a friend with only a high school degree to lunch. Insensitively, I led her into a gourmet sandwich shop. Suddenly I saw her face freeze up as she was confronted with sandwiches named “Padrino” and “Pomodoro” and ingredients like soppressata, capicollo and a striata baguette. I quickly asked her if she wanted to go somewhere else and she anxiously nodded yes and we ate Mexican.

This anecdote is easy to poke fun at. Brooks’ description of a friend with “only” a highschool degree implies that he (and his friends) are generally much better educated, or that his incredulous reader could otherwise not believe that “high-school educated” meant she had no higher degree . His use (and emphasis) of “insensitively” implies that with previous meditation, Brooks would have thought better of taking his friend to a “gourmet” sandwich restaurant, because it would be immediately apparent to him that she would be unequipped to handle the experience. His friend’s “sudden” “confrontation” (the informal barrier here physically instantiated through this vocabulary) with the names of sandwiches, and her “anxious” nodding (because she is ostensibly so uncomfortable that she cannot speak) when Brooks chivalrously asks her to switch establishments, create an indelible sense of melodrama.

Brooks’ underlying conservative and classist ideologies are here contained with his paternalistic impulse, dramatized in anecdote-form. The character of Brooks is cool and collected, described as “insensitive” and “quick,” while his companion is emotional and overwhelmed: her face “freezes” as she is “confronted” with the names of sandwiches and her nod is “anxious.” For Brooks, the high-school-educated have a emotive, childlike quality, to which the “well-educated” may respond with caretaking: he first “lead[s]” her to the sandwich shop and later to Mexican food.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Much has been made of the possibly racist implications of switch to Mexican, as Brooks’ logical opposite to “gourmet” food; we will turn to this later.

Just as Brooks invokes a high-school educated friend for this anecdote, he uses “well-educated” to mean “upper-middle-class” throughout the article, and “less educated” to mean “poor” (a term he uses only once, and even then in tandem with “less educated”) or “lower-class” (a term which he never uses). This vocabulary choice reinforces Brooks’ beliefs that class differences are culturally, rather than structurally enforced: class is not a matter of money, but of education. This kind of language is typical of the American meritocracy. Education is (hypothetically) the purest meritocracy of them all: for those who want to learn, there are schools and for those who do well, there are scholarships. In grounding this discussion in terms of “education” rather than money, Brooks effectively glosses over the effect of structural inequalities on the quality of education, making the issue knowledge itself. He equates institutionally-wrought knowledge from higher education to culturally-wrought sandwich knowledge.

David Brooks’ emphasis “informal social barriers” adheres to conservative ideology insofar as it minimizes the need for policy or government intervention, instead laying a much vaguer responsibility at the feet of the “educated class,” which has “created barriers to mobility that are more devastating for being invisible.” With the title of the article “How We Are Ruining America,” he attempts to soften the blow by aligning himself with the upper-middle-class perpetrating this “ruining”— but the implication is clear. It is the middle class’s responsibility, and not the government's, to address this injustice.

In the column published on July 17th, 2017 (the week following the sandwich debacle), Brooks recommends Bourdieu to his readers, summarizing that “cultural inequality [does not] create economic inequality, but [...]widens and it legitimizes it.” In many ways, Brooks’ sandwich anecdote classically adheres the the markers of “distinction” Johnston and Baumann outline. His anecdote, however, fails insofar as it is all “distinction” and no “democracy.” Despite his invocations of the meritocracy, his high-school educated friend is portrayed as powerless and woefully short on merit. He violated the first rule of Americanness, the almost-nationally held democratic ideology which Johnston and Baumann define as the

normative conceptions and populist ideals of the United States as a classless, multicultural society, where immigrants of multiple races and ethnicities have equal opportunities for socioeconomic and cultural advancement, at least in theory.

Although responses to Brooks' article come in a broad variety of flavors, ranging in issues addressed and advice offered, most commenters seek to convey the depths of Brooks' snobbishness, and how they (despite being very probably in different class than this high-school-educated friend) identify more strongly with the friend's position toward the lunch meats than with Brooks'.

Brooks' article spurred so many passionate responses because it touched too close to one of the most basic beliefs of American egalitarianism. Per the internet, commentators found many things on the article worth commenting on: they mourned Brooks' dismissal of structural inequalities, they dismissed Italian food alternately as too fancy as not-that-fancy. Commenters accused Brooks of being a snob and his high-school educated friend of not being curious enough. Through these complaints that they disassociated themselves from Brooks (in a classic case of horizontal boundary drawing, as outlined by Lizardo and Skiles), reasserting their omnivorousness in contrast to Brooks' snobbishness. It is through this signaling that commenters, through denouncing intolerance reinforce their own social and cultural standing through their deployment of "democracy" and "distinction."

This study takes for its corpus the 3223 comments made July 11th, 2017 on David Brooks' article, "How We Are Ruining America." Although CDA is typically preoccupied with "top-down" reproduction of domination starting with institutionalized power (parliamentary debate, policy, newspaper articles), I sought to explore how discourse reproduces hierarchy in informal contexts. Responses to Brooks' article offered a particular opportunity to discern how Americans "talk" about class relations and cultural capital "in the wild" (outside of the survey and interview contexts which have been used in previous research) (see Savage 2000, Jarness 2015, 2017, Ollivier 2008). The comments were also specifically semi-public (they could be read by anyone, but as one among three thousand, it could be assumed that they would not be read by everyone) and simultaneously "private" in their address to David Brooks, or even to their fellow commenters. This corpus was also large enough, that I was able to identify recurring themes and

arguments which appeared again and again, and it was through following these themes and arguments that I was ultimately able to identify the topoi that define omnivorous class discourse.

## **5. Methodology**

In this section, I will specify the specific approach of this paper first specifying the methodology used in this paper and enumerating the semantic macrostructures explored in the corpus, and then outlining some possible critiques of CDA and outline how my paper seeks to overcome these criticisms.

### *5.1 An analysis of omnivorousness*

I begin my analysis by inductively identifying the common discursive structures within the corpus which manifest attitudes and their underlying ideologies. Here, following Johnston and Baumann, I sought manifestations of the tension between the underlying ideologies of democracy and distinction (or dominance) which inform the attitude of omnivorousness. Following Abu Talib's (2015) adoption of a "genealogical approach," I compiled a data set that is "open ended, living, fluid, organic, and growing in the sense that it is accumulated by tracing them problematization of (moral) truths as the data unfolds," exploring comments relative to the themes which emerged (40). While Johnston and Baumann examine how these ideologies are expressed through "frames," this paper takes more seriously the sociocognitive component of discourse, and analyzes the various mental models which arise out of these ideologies.

Van Dijk (1993) points out that while socially-shared knowledge, attitudes, and ideologies are characteristic of a group, specific models are "unique, personal and contextualized: they define how one [...] now produces or understands this specific text, even when large parts of such processes are not biographically but socially determined." This is particularly important to bear in mind in this study, where the corpus is comprised of many short comments by thousands of individuals. While some comments shared lexicon or topoi, no two comments were exactly the same; there was no centralized messaging. Mental models, however, allow us to "link the personal with the social," and to read the social cognitive processes which underlie personally-expressed discourse (van Dijk 1993).

Discourse structures were analyzed at both the semantic and pragmatic level, although the pragmatic figured particularly strong as each comment replies more or less directly to the article, and many comments use the second-person to address Brooks directly. Although this “conversation” about class differences takes place on a public platform, it is essentially within the dominant class (most commenters identify as being in the upper-middle-class, as does Brooks himself), and thus the enactment of dominance is not “direct” (i.e. there are no, or very few low cultural capital people). In this particular context model, dominance is encoded in mental models in “such a way that this model will in turn confirm negative attitudes and ideologies in the audience” (van Dijk 1993).

I identify what van Dijk (1989) cites as two “classic strateg[ies]” of reproducing dominance: the first, denial (“there is no dominance, all people in our society are equal, and have equal access to social resources”), and the second, justification of inequality (“it is ‘just,’ ‘necessary’ or ‘natural’ that we have privileged access to valuable social resources”). Commenters use the first strategy of denial by alternately expressing that the cultural capital Brooks describes is available to “everyone” or to “no one.” The second strategy, justification, relies on the positive representation of one’s own group used in tandem with negative representation of “others” (Van Dijk 1989). In this case, commenters express models wherein their privilege is justified by their possession of the omnivorous values of “openness” and “curiosity,” which they contrast against the the closed-mindedness or lack of curiosity in other groups. This valorization of “openness” draws boundaries against low(er) cultural capital people with high(er) economic capital who only engage with “legitimized” art forms (“snobs”), as well as against low(er) cultural capital people who are “incurious” about “legitimized” art forms. As the literature has shown (Jarness 2015, 2017; Holt 1997), what Lizardo and Skiles (2012) refer to as “horizontal boundary drawing” is vital to the deployment of the omnivorous attitude. Because the anti-snobishness of the omnivorous attitude, intraclass differentiation is as important to the reproduction of class ideology and dominance as interclass differentiation.

Having identified these ideologies, I sought to examine and describe discursive structures such as topics, topoi, arguments, lexicon which manifest and reproduce the omnivorous attitude through its reproduction of classist ideology through a discourse marked by democracy and

distinction. I pay particular attention to constructions of identity through self-presentations and the commonsensical deployment of a system of norms and values (“general abstract components of underlying ideologies”) affiliated with omnivorousness. I also and ideological polarization (us vs. them) as established through specific pronoun usage and

It is worth noting that this is case study. The comments explored below express ideas I found to be typical of the comment section in general, but with limited resources, it was impossible to do a quantitative analysis of how all 3223 comments were structured. Finally, this study addresses the role of discourse in the reproduction of inequality in America.

## *5.2 Limitations: critiques of CDA*

In this section, I will address two critiques of CDA: the first is the controversy surrounding the “critical perspective” (one of the defining characteristics of CDA), and the second, is the lack of a clearly defined methodology which can be directly implemented in research.

### *Orientation and Reflexivity*

It is fundamental to the practice of CDA that researchers take an explicit political position, but critics argue that the lack of objectivity implied by this “predetermined perspective” de-legitimizes the analysis. Widdowson (1995) argues that CDA is “itself a critical discourse,” and as such, practices “interpretation, not analysis” (169). In response, Fairclough (2003) points out that there is no such thing as a “complete and definitive analysis of a text” (13). CDA rejects the notion of an “objective” and “neutral” science, and unlike many other approaches, is explicit about its position and commitment. Furthermore, Fairclough encourages researchers to address bias in selecting and analyzing texts through reflexivity. Bucholtz (2001) specifies that

the problem is not that researchers hold professed and well-defined political commitments but that they may fail to consider how their politics shapes the research process itself (178).

Thus, reflexive researchers must be cognizant about how their politics is affecting their research. Rogers et al. (2005) warn against using reflexivity in order to create “an accurate representation of ‘reality’” (382). As Chouliaraki and Fairclough (1999) point out, reflexivity is itself caught up in social struggle and researchers are of course part of the language practices that they study. The

intention of the reflexive stance must be modified according to the “knowledge and reality of the researcher and the extent to which the researchers turn these frameworks on themselves” (Rogers et al. 2005: 382). In CDA, researchers must position themselves not just as “text analysts” but also as “data collection instruments,” and members of the educational community.

### *Methodology & Multifariousness*

CDA has also been criticized its lack of a standardized methodology. Verschueren (2001) and Martin (2000), for example, have argued for a more “systematic” and “rigorous” application of CDA. Bucholtz (2001) condemns this “universalistic urge,” citing the multifariousness (social semiotics, sociocognitive studies, discourse historical method) of CDA is one of its strengths (Fairclough and Wodak 1997). The broadness of the field allows for the application of many sometimes overlapping methodologies which allow researchers to take a fluid approach which is able to adapt to fully address complex social problems. Applying a singular approach or framework in a systemic, mechanical way would be problematic or reductive (van Dijk, 1993: 252), and obfuscate the multifariousness of discourse itself. Rather than taking a deterministic, singular approach to analysis, research must employ a multidisciplinary approach to “unravel complex, explicit relationships between language, identity construction, and inequality” (Abu Talib 2015: 38). For Fairclough (2001) stresses that CDA is “as much theory as method,” (125) while van Dijk holds that CDA(S)<sup>3</sup> is a “critical perspective or attitude,” which many methods from the humanities and social sciences (van Dijk 2015: 63).

## **6. Analysis and Discussion**

This section analyzes tracks how the omnivorous orientation of “openness” has become the new measurement through which omnivorous consumers produce their own place in the social hierarchy, and by which they locate the position of others.

I

---

<sup>3</sup> Van Dijk prefers the term “Critical Discourse Studies” over “Critical Discourse Analysis.”

## 6.1 Meats known and unknown

There are two responses to Brooks' invocation of knowledge-of-sandwich as class signifier. Some commenters intone that the Italian sandwiches Brooks describes are not as fancy he imagines them to be ("Lol at sopressata being 'upscale'"), or that with "TV food shows and constant food related posts online, instagram [...] everybody knows what sopressata or capicola are." More commonly, commenters cite their background ("I was born to educated parents in one cosmopolitan city and I live in another") and the extent of their education ("I have a B.A. from an elite college and a PhD from another") to say, generally within the same sentence, that they too "have no idea what sopressata is, or a striata baguette, either."

These approaches are complementary, in that they both downplay class difference, emphasizing the universality of the possession or lack of this knowledge (regardless of whether *everyone* possesses it or *no one* has it). This is, as van Dijk notes, a "classic" method for the reproduction of inequality: if differences do not exist, they cannot be rectified. Importantly, the both methods establish the commenters as high-status consumers— at least insofar as they feel qualified to comment on what knowledge people in high-status classes ought to or ought not to be expected to have. From the passé camp:

[A]

Living and working in NYC and you think 'sopressata' is high-end and exotic? If anyone is out of touch here...it's you Mr. Brooks.

This commenter is able to critique Brooks' for "think[ing]" sopressata is "high-end and exotic" because he, unlike Brooks, knows that sopressata is neither high-end nor exotic. His accusation that Brooks is "out of touch" is thrice emphasized, first by the question-answer setup of the comment, second by the passive structure of the answering sentence, and third with the ellipsis. [A], then, must be very much "in touch."<sup>4</sup> He is high status; Italian sandwiches are not. "Taste classifies and it classifies the classifier:" the commenters is marked as a member of the

---

<sup>4</sup> As Johnston and Baumann point out, the "the broadening of the repertoire of worthy foods" in the reproduction of the omnivorous sensibility "is concomitant with the demarcation of other food preferences as banal, undistinguished, or unsophisticated."

dominant class through his ability to discern the relative status of certain sandwiches, and that he is so marked reproduces the taxonomy that makes such sandwiches a status symbol.

Similarly, commenters who list their credentials in order to reject the sandwich-as-signifier do so from a place of distinction. On a surface level, this discursive structure responds to Brooks' conflation of economic status and education level, and his implication that while his high-school educated friend was cowed by "padrino, pomodoro," a more "educated" person would not be. This argument depends on underlying assumption that the commenter, as a member of the elite, is able to speak to whether or not the elite possess knowledge of the sandwiches Brooks mentions. These commenters do not just express their lack of knowledge surrounding the sandwiches, but emphasize how comfortable they are with this lack of knowledge:

[B]

I have a BA, MA, JD and Ph.D. I'm not poorly educated, to say the least. I don't recall ever seeing "soppresseta," "capicollo," and a "striata" baguette on a menu [...] I'm perfectly comfortable admitting as much, and would have preferred Mexican too.

This assertion of indifference toward institutionalized or legitimized forms of hierarchy is defining of the the omnivorous orientation. However, as Lizardo and Skiles point out, omnivores typically benefit from high-status upbringings which provided them with sufficient access and support to confidently deploy the aesthetic disposition across many domains. It is a privilege of the high-status class to confidently admit to a lack of knowledge without fear of losing status. Here exercised as a form of horizontal boundary drawing, against Brooks' snobbishness, these comments reproduce and reinforce the taxonomy of open-mindedness, under the guise of expressing personal taste.

## *6.2 Self-presentation*

In his analysis of anti-racist discourse in a parliamentary debate in Brazil, van Dijk (2009) examines the way speakers' self-presentations have the "primary function of legitimation of [the speaker's] current role as participant in the debate" (80). The self-presentations of commenters' familial and educational backgrounds similarly qualifies them to participate in, and contribute to the "debate" that Brooks instigates.

Through this self-presentation, commenters assert their ability to contest Brooks' implicit claim that college-educated people (as opposed to high-school-educated people) are able to identify Italian charcuterie. Identifying themselves as educated people, their denial of this knowledge is a rejection of Brooks' perceived anti-egalitarian argument. Many commenters do not simply identify themselves as "college-educated," but go on to enumerate their terminal degrees and specify their *alma maters*, along with other qualifications they seemingly understand to be affiliated with high-status people.

[C]

I went to 4 different universities in 3 countries, speak 4 languages, English being my third language. Yet I have no idea what "Padrino, Pomodoro" ... mean.

[D]

Heck, David, I graduated summa cum laude and Phi Beta Kappa from Middlebury, then went through a PhD program in literature and I don't know what "soppressata, capicollo and a striata baguette" are.

As part of his self-presentation, [D] lists not only his degree from a prestigious institution (Middlebury), but the honors of his degree (summa cum laude), his membership to an honors society (Phi Beta Kappa), and, finally, his enrollment in a PhD program. In [C], the commenter mentions his education (4 universities), and emphasizes a cosmopolitan knowledge of different cultures (3 countries, fluency in 4 languages), which serves as equally legitimate evidence of accreditation to the high culture capital group.

Both speakers use this self-presentation to distinguish themselves from other educated people; they present themselves not just as members of the educated class, but create a hierarchy within the educated class, implying that they are among the most educated, and thus especially qualified to comment on Brooks' Italian ingredients. They express ideologies of egalitarianism only by reproducing the very taxonomy which they are refuting (within the educated group, rather than across all of society) because this socially-shared commitment to the legitimacy of the hierarchy has permeated their mental model, so that even as individuals rely on hierarchy in order to denounce it. If they, as the most educated of the educated, cannot identify soppressata, no one else could be expected to either.

### 6.3 Pronouns: *us v. them*

Turning to how commenters construct the identity of the group. “We” appears twice in Brooks’ article: first in the title, “How We Are Ruining America,” and a second time in the last paragraph of the article, where it is specified to include

We in the educated class have created barriers to mobility that are more devastating for being invisible. The rest of America can’t name them, can’t understand them. They just know they’re there.

With this, Brooks presupposes that readers of his article identify, like him, as members of “the educated class,” and he constructs an other: “the rest of America,” who he refers to again anaphorically as “they.” Commenters took issue with this, refusing to be grouped with Brooks in a “we” of any kind. Below, I have included some examples with bracketed glosses of how this commenter engages in boundary drawing, claiming their own definitions of “us” vs. “them”:

[E]

Who is this "we" you speak of? [...] And Mr. Brooks, you are outing yourself and your neighbors with your examples of cultural hegemony. It's insulting and narcissistic that you actually think you speak for the rest of us.

[we/us: the rest of us

them/you: Brooks and his neighbors (who engage in cultural hegemony)]

[F]

"We" are not "ruining" America. The wealthy and well-connected are. The billionaires and multimillionaires who have taken over this country lock, stock and government. The rich have run rough shod over the rest of us, highly educated or not.

[we/us: the rest of us, highly educated or not

them: the wealthy and well-connected/billionaires and multimillionaires/the rich]

According to Van Dijk (1995c) “the identity category of a group ideology organized the information as well as the social and institutional actions that define membership: who is admitted and who is not” (19).

The use of the large number of synonyms or near-synonymous terms visible in [F]’s characterization of the “the wealthy” constitutes what is called “overlexicalization,” and as such,

points “to areas of intense preoccupation in the experience and values of the group which generates it, allowing the linguists to identify peculiarities in the ideology of that group” (Fowler & Kress 1979: 212). Here, the overlexicalization of “the wealthy,” who are described within the same comment as the “well-connected, the billionaires and multimillionaires, the rich” is used to emphasize the differences between the aforementioned wealthy, and “the rest of us.” The activities the wealthy are apparently engaging in are also overlexicalized: they are not just “ruining America,” but have “taken over this country,” and “run rough shod over the rest of us.”

We can see clearly underlying democratic ideology, wherein the commenter stresses that whether or not he is “highly educated,” he is still part of the “rest of us,” and not a part of the truly elite. This betrays a certain anxiety surrounding privilege, and the desire to separate oneself from the elite class.

#### *6.4 Norms and values: curiosity and confidence*

##### *Commonsensical deployment of norms and values*

The omnivorous worldview reformulates the socially-held meritocratic model, establishing a commonsensicalized system of norms and values that serves to justify inequality. In some incarnations (when “class” is economically defined), meritocratic language establishes “work-ethic” as the most sought-after trait. In the manifesting model, the rich are hard-working (hence their affluence) and the poor are lazy (hence their poverty) (Cassiman 2008).

In the the omnivorous attitude, however, eliteness is coded by cultural tolerance, and commenters invoke the correlating values of “openness,” “confidence,” and “curiosity” to justify class difference. Commenters represent the exclusion of those with low cultural capital as part of the “institutionalized penalties” described by (Lizardo & Skiles 2012) for those who are unable to engage in “the flexible deployment of the aestheticizing scheme” and thus appear as “intolerant” or “exclusionary” (Lizardo and Skiles 2012). Elites set the terms through which “tastes are assigned moral and social value,” reproducing the of the omnivorous lifestyle as a personal trait or characteristics (Holt 1997).

Commenters argue that Brooks' friend was "incurious" and too easily cowed by words she was unfamiliar with. They see her failure to order a sandwich as a lack of "curiosity," and the lack of curiosity as the reason she does not belong in the "high status" sandwich shop.

[G]

It is not privilege that separates the well-educated and uneducated. It is curiosity and a willingness to take risks—to venture out of one's comfort zone.

[H]

What defines an educated class is not going to a Harvard, but by one's \*curiosity.\* The lack of curiosity of someone like Trump is disheartening and—I fear—normalizing.

These comments actively refute hierarchization which is based on "privilege" or attendance of "a Harvard," in favor of hierarchization based on "one's \*curiosity.\*" [H] implies that Donald Trump, despite his wealth and Ivy League education, is not a member of the "educated class" because of his "lack of curiosity."<sup>5</sup> Such an approach discursively reproduces the hierarchy which values the "educated" above the "uneducated," but dialogically disassociates the high-status "educated-class" from "education" itself. This overtly seems to express an egalitarian understanding of educatedness—these commenters do not depend on institutionally condoned notions of educatedness, essentially arguing that one does not have to have a formal education in order to belong to the "educated class."

Both comments skirt the way this "curiosity and a willingness to take risks" are in fact fostered by the educational opportunities and the stability offered by "privilege" (Lizardo and Skiles 2012, Holt 1997). These statements positively represent the issuers as members of the "curious," educated class, and the other, the "uneducated" (whether or not they are economically stable) as incurious. The commenters' ability to arbitrate the "ranking principle" in determining class depends on their membership to the dominant (or curious) class. This functions to commonsensicalize what constitutes a "valuable" person, and how that value is to be rewarded.

---

<sup>5</sup> If "what defines the educated class" is "\*curiosity\*" and Trump has a "disheartening" lack of curiosity, we must assume he does not belong to what this commenter understands to be the "educated class."

These examples also emphasize the importance another value: confidence. Because the omnivorous perspective arises (Lizardo & Skiles (2016) argue) out of a long-cultivated confidence in our ability to interpret the aesthetic, and later an expansion to what we would deem aesthetic, confidence in your opinion and your ability to make aesthetic judgements is fundamental. This confidence is coded throughout this discourse as a value complementary to curiosity.

### 6.5 Habits and class

Some commenters write that if were they to be in the same position as Brooks' friend, they simply "would have" asked:

[I]

I don't even know what sopressata, capicollo or striata baguette means, and I have a Ph.D. Your friend could have done what *I would have done*, which is ask.

[J]

Instead of going somewhere else like your friend did, *I would have asked* the server to get me what he thinks is their best sandwich, something I do each time I discover a new cuisine whether it's Argentinian, Israeli, Ethiopian, Norwegian.

Commenters in these examples take on a prescriptive role, not through explicitly condemning the behavior of Brooks' friend, but by drawing a distinction between what Brooks' ("incurious" and "intimidated") friend did (go somewhere else) and what they would have done (ask). These comments rely on an apparently apolitical, "elective" (Holt 1997) expression of taste or habit.

As Fairclough (2003) points out, statements with deontic (obligational) modalities express evaluations and "deeply-embedded" "assumed values" (179). In [I] and [J], we see the use of deontic modal verb "would have" (as a first person assertion of an implicit second-person "should have"). This not only establishes an evaluative system which prizes curiosity, but also (either implicitly [I] or explicitly [J]) gestures toward the commenter's pre-formed mental model or script for behavior in a situation wherein one might "discover a new cuisine whether it's Argentinian, Israeli, Ethiopian, Norwegian" (or, ostensibly, Italian).

Their reading is predicated their previous access to novel situations which has allowed them to develop a mental model for how to behave. Omnivorousness valorizes curiousness, confidence, and a desire for new experiences. Omnivores experience and understand these values

as idiosyncratic facets of their taste, personality, and identity. They prescribe them to encourage others to be more open to new experiences, implying that anyone can be, and emphasizing as we saw in [G] and [H] that these traits are not affiliated with status or class. At the same time, their experience of exercising these values, coded as traits, has only been in extremely privileged environments.

## *6.6 Preferences*

It is worth noting that while commenters in the previous section admonish Brooks' friend for her lack of "curiosity" and "confidence," there is another camp which rejects David Brooks' reading of the situation altogether. As Fairclough (2003) might point out, Brooks' anecdote shows a stunning lack of dialogicality, and his friend, the central character of the story is voiceless throughout the exchange. Brooks seems to understand that his friend is intimidated by the Italian sandwiches due to her face "freez[ing] up," after which he asks her "if she wanted to go somewhere else," and still she does not speak, but "anxiously nod[s] yes."

Thus, as many commenters note, it seems as if Brooks is being presumptuous about the reasons behind his friend's desire to leave. Some commenters acknowledge this, posting (often playfully) alternative explanations, which range from her possibly being gluten-free [N] or vegetarian, to her not wanting to spend her money on outrageously pretentious sandwiches.

[J]

I think David Brooks read that deli situation all wrong. His guest was troubled by the apparent lack of gluten free options and non-cured meats (he/she was likely on a low sodium diet). Fortunately Mexicans are known to be gluten free, low sodium options.

The "well-educated" commenters emphasize their distance (emotional if not geographical) from the upper-middle-class lifestyle that Brooks describes, and their refusal to be duped by such artificial and "pretentious" trappings, emphasizing that they are not at all uncomfortable with their lack of knowledge surrounding this culture. Furthermore, many say that (even) they would prefer Mexican over a "pretentious" Italian sandwich store. These arguments, insofar as they are disavowals of snobbish culture are of course, fundamental to the omnivorous consumption of the dominant classes.

[K]

As an effete Wharton graduate, I prefer Mexican any day.

[L]

Perhaps his high school educated friend prefers to avoid pretentious places and knows for instance, that the coffee at Macdonald's is better than Starbucks.

As Lizardo and Skiles (2012) point out, people in the dominant class can have the confidence in their knowledge and aesthetic sensibility to engage in less codified or validated cultural consumption. It is their privilege to reject middle class culture, because, as they state through their pedigrees, they belong there. This is the true importance in the juxtaposition of the pedigree and disavowal: the former is that which enables the latter. If they were not to be in the high-status class and disavowed high-status class culture, their rejection would be meaningless. Lower-status people lack the confidence garnered from a secure upbringing with exposure to art objects, to make the same judgements. This positioning as the anti-snob is a classic expression of omnivorousness. This disownment of culture as a class signifier (I don't care about these things, so why should anyone else?) once again assume the status of the arbiter.

#### *6.7 In contrast: non-omnivores in action*

Not all 3223 comments expressed omnivorous values. Below are two examples of non-omnivorous responses to Brooks' article which manifest class differences more explicitly. Because of the relative "freedom" of information via the internet, "ignorance" becomes particularly inexcusable. Because lower-status individuals apparently have access to the same sources as higher-status individuals, there is no reason that they should not possess the same knowledge, except deliberate action.

[M]

Information is there for all, the ignorant choose to become intimidated by it and run from it, just like your friend did. You could have even told her what the menu meant and she would have come away smarter. Someone else's stupidity does not make me, as a middle-class educated person, feel guilty. Far from it, Brooks. Your friend should feel guilty for being so lazy.

[N]

It's not as if the "working class" are locked away from information that's spoon-fed only to the wealthy few. Every single one of them has a smartphone. Perhaps it's their blank disinterest in Googling "capicola" or "baguette" or "Beethoven" while eagerly searching and scanning Youtube videos about the Kardashians and Beyonce that's more at fault

here.

These examples, more strongly worded than those that preceded, invoke traits more canonically associated with the poor (“laziness” and “stupidity” in [M]). I suspect for this reason (along with the derision of Beyonce in favor of the more legitimized Beethoven in [N]) that these commenters are not omnivores, but “snobs.” Their ideology of distinction is overtly expressed and not softened by a democratic ideology. Disinterest in elite culture (marked by one’s refusal to google “capicolla” or “baguette” or “Beethoven”) is the highest crime. This model assumes that the only “ignorant,” with agency, “choose” to “become intimidated” and “run,” or show “blank disinterest” in the face of a possible learning experience. This not only ignores the premise of the story in which Brooks paternalistically offers to take his friend to a new restaurant, but simultaneously justifies (it’s their fault that they are indifference!) and denies (everyone has access to the internet!) inequality. This argument, that inequality is over because of the internet, strikes me as similar to the argument that racism is over because there was a black president.

Beneath [N], a responding comment:

[O]

Every single member of the working class has a smartphone??? Wrong, snob. I am a member of the working class who can only afford a flip phone. And I'm not interested in the celebrities you mentioned.

The last line, expressing disinterest in Beyonce and the Kardashians, preserves the presupposition in [N] that class can be identified through cultural consumption. Another prescient commenter writes: “the most repellent part of this piece relies of the belief that social class and personal interests are inextricably intertwined in this country. They aren't.” Unfortunately, would seem that they are.

## **7. Conclusion**

Despite the persistence of severe inequality in America, explicit awareness of class has dissolved and class has become more “individualized,” implicitly encoded in identity through practice. Recent sociological research has shown that high-status individuals are “omnivorous” cultural

consumers, in that they consume both high- and low- status goods, with an orientation characterized by tolerance, openness, and curiosity. While it would seem that this mode of consumption is more “democratic” or “egalitarian,” in that it does not depend on top-down institutionalized notions of value, and is open to non-legitimate culture, omnivorousness has in fact only shifted the system of values associated with high-status consumption. Now, elite status is signified through an (apparent) indifference to status, and the “traits” associated with omnivorousness (openness) are understood to hold inherent moral value (effectively glossing over the way these traits are produced by a high-status upbringing), while those do not possess these traits are excluded because of their “intolerance” or lack of curiosity. This study examines the way omnivorous values are embedded in and expressed through discourse by analyzing underlying sociocognitive model.

The mental models of high-status consumers are informed by competing ideologies of democracy and distinction. The overtly expressed ideology of democratic is a vital facet of American social cognition, but is here expressed as an (apparent) disregard for the status of particular consumed goods (as determined by an institutionalized arbiter). The ideology of distinction is more covertly expressed, and manifesting from the mental model wherein the overt expression of democracy distinguishes the speaker from other, less “open” or “tolerant” speakers. Omnivorousness reformulates the the socially-shared meritocratic model so that the values of “curiosity” and openness objective moral goods, and thus justifying the exclusion of those who lack them. This functions against the economically-secure (snobs) and the economically-insecure (the incurious) and allows omnivores (high cultural capital consumers) to distinguish themselves as the class in possession of the most moral good.

It is vital to reiterate that this kind of class reproduction is done unconsciously, and that, cognitively, omnivores experience their taste as a personal habit or trait. This study has traced the way that discourse manifests expresses underlying cognitive frames, and how those frames reproduce class difference.



## Works Cited

- Abu Talib, Nadira (2016). Inequality as meritocracy: a critical discourse analysis of the metaphors of flexibility, diversity, and choice, and the value of truth in Singapore's education policies, 1979 - 2012. PhD Thesis, School of Communication and Arts, The University of Queensland. doi:10.14264/uql.2016.142
- Bauman, Z. 1992. *Intimations of Postmodernity*. London: Routledge
- Bottero, W. (2004). Class identities and the identity of class, *Sociology*, 38 (5): 985–1003. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038504047182>
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1984. *Distinction: a Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Brooks, D. (2017, July 11). How We Are Ruining America. *The New York Times*, Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com>
- Bucholtz, M. (2001). Reflexivity and critique in discourse analysis, *Critique of Anthropology*, Vol 21(2): 165–183, Retrieved from [http://www.linguistics.ucsb.edu/faculty/bucholtz/sites/secure.lsit.ucsb.edu.ling.d7\\_b/files/sitefiles/research/publications/Bucholtz2001-CritAnth.pdf](http://www.linguistics.ucsb.edu/faculty/bucholtz/sites/secure.lsit.ucsb.edu.ling.d7_b/files/sitefiles/research/publications/Bucholtz2001-CritAnth.pdf)
- Cassiman, S. A. (2008). Resisting the neo-liberal poverty discourse: On constructing deadbeat dads and welfare queens. *Sociology Compass*, 2(5): 1690–1700, Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1751-9020.2008.00159.x>
- Chandler, R. (2013). Meme World Syndrome: A Critical Discourse Analysis Of The First World Problems And Third World Success. Internet Memes. Electronic Theses and Dissertations.
- Chouliaraki, L & Fairclough, N. 1999. *Discourse in Late Modernity: Rethinking Critical Discourse Analysis*. Edinburgh University Press.
- DiMaggio, P., & Mukhtar, T. (2004). Arts participation as cultural capital in the United States, 1982–2002: Signs of decline? *Poetics*, 32(2): 169–194, Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.poetic.2004.02.005>

- Fairclough, N. (2001). Critical discourse analysis as a method in social scientific research. In R. Wodak & M. Meyer (2001). *Methods of critical discourse analysis* (121-137). London: Sage.
- Fairclough, N. 2003. *Analysing Discourse: Textual Analysis for Social Research*. Routledge: London.
- Fairclough, N. (2012). The Dialectics of Discourse, *Textus*, Vol. XIV, No. 2, 2001: 231-242. Retrieved from <https://www.sfu.ca/cmns/courses/2012/801/1-Readings/Fairclough%20Dialectics%20of%20Discourse%20Analysis.pdf>
- Fowler, R., & Kress, G. (1979). Critical linguistics. In Fowler, R., Hodge, B., Kress, G., & Trew, T. (Eds.) *Language and Control* (185-213). London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Goldberg, A. (2011). Mapping shared understandings using relational class analysis: the case of the cultural omnivore reexamined. *American Journal of Sociology*, 116: 397–436, Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1086/657976>
- Holt, Douglas. (1997). Distinction in America? Recovering Bourdieu's theory of tastes from its critics, *Poetics*, 25: 93-120, Retrieved from [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0304-422X\(97\)00010-7](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0304-422X(97)00010-7)
- Jackson, M. (2007). How far merit selection? Social stratification and the labour market. *The British Journal of Sociology*, 58: 367-390. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-4446.2007.00156.x>
- Jarness, V. (2017). Cultural vs economic capital: Symbolic boundaries within the middle class. *Sociology*, Vol 51, Issue 2: 357 - 373, Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038515596909>
- Jarness, V. (2015). Modes of consumption: From ‘what’ to ‘how’ in cultural stratification research. *Poetics* : Volume 53: 65-79, Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.poetic.2015.08.002>.
- Jensen, T. (2014). Welfare commonsense, poverty porn and doxosophy, *Sociological Research Online*, vol 19, no 3, Retrieved from <http://www.socresonline.org.uk/19/3/3.html>; I.

- Johnston, J. & Baumann, S. (2007). Democracy versus Distinction: A Study of Omnivorousness in Gourmet Food Writing. *American Journal of Sociology* 113.1: 165–204, Retrieved from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/518923>.
- Lamont, M. (1992). *Money, Morals, and Manners: The Culture of the French and the American Upper-Middle Class*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Lizardo, O. & Skiles, S. (2012). Reconceptualizing and Theorizing “Omnivorousness” Genetic and Relational Mechanisms. *Sociological Theory*, 30: 263-282, Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1177/0735275112466999>
- Lizardo, O. (2016). Why “cultural matters” matter: Culture talk as the mobilization of cultural capital in interaction. *Poetics* 58, Retrieved from doi:10.1016/j.poetic.2016.09.002
- Ollivier, M. (2008). Modes of Openness to Cultural Diversity: Humanist, Populist, Practical, and Indifferent Omnivores. *Poetics* 36: 120–147, Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.poetic.2008.02.005>
- Peterson, Richard A. & Roger M. Kern. 1996. Changing Highbrow Taste: From Snob to Omnivore. *American Sociological Review* 61:900-907, Retrieved from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2096460>
- Peterson, Richard A. (1997). The Rise and Fall of Highbrow Snobbery as a Status Marker. *Poetics* 25:75-92, Retrieved from [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0304-422X\(97\)00013-2](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0304-422X(97)00013-2).
- Savage, M. 2000. *Class Analysis and Social Transformation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Skeggs, B. (1997) Classifying Practices: Representations, Capitals and Recognitions, in P. Mahony and C. Zmroczek (eds) *Class Matters*: 123–34. London: Taylor and Francis.
- Śliwa, M. & Johansson, M. (2013). The discourse of meritocracy contested/reproduced: Foreign women academics in UK business schools. *Organization*. 21: 6, Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1177/1350508413486850>.
- van Dijk, T. (1985). Cognitive situation models in discourse production: The expression of ethnic situations in prejudiced discourse. In: J.P. Forgas (Ed.), *Language and social situations* (pp. 61-79). New York: Springer

- van Dijk, T. (1993). Principles of critical discourse analysis. *Discourse & Society* 4(2): 249-283,  
Retrieved from  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0957926593004002006>
- van Dijk, T. (1995). Discourse analysis as ideology analysis. In C. Schäffner & A. Wenden  
(Eds.), *Language and pace* (17-33). Aldershot: Dartmouth.
- van Dijk, T. (2009). Critical Discourse Studies: A Sociocognitive Approach. In *Methods for  
Critical Discourse Analysis*, ed. by Ruth Wodak & Michael Meyer, 62-86, selected  
62-67, 75-80. London: Sage.
- Weininger, Elliot B. (2005). Foundations of Pierre Bourdieu's Class Analysis. Pp. 82-118 in  
*Approaches to Class Analysis*, edited by Erik Olin Wright. Cambridge: Cambridge  
University Press.
- Wodak, R., & Meyer, M. 2009. *Methods of critical discourse analysis* (2nd ed.). London, UK:  
Sage.