

# *Distinction* meets 'dirty work': on the tracks of symbolic domination and autonomy among refuse collectors in a Danish city

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● The logic of adjustment of dispositions to position allows us to understand how the dominated can exhibit more *submission* (and less resistance and subversion) than those who see them through the eyes, i.e. the habitus, of the dominant or the dominated dominant, that is, less than intellectual envision. Having said this, there is no denying that there exist dispositions to resist; and one of the tasks of sociology is precisely to examine under what conditions these dispositions are socially constructed, effectively triggered, and rendered politically efficient. But when they go in direction of a sort of spontaneist populism, theories of resistance often forget that the dominated seldom escape the antinomy of domination (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992:81-82).

● Ordinary workers are dominated by the machines and instruments by which they serve rather than use, and by those who possess the legitimate, i.e., theoretical, means of dominating them. In the factory as in school [...] workers encounter legitimate culture as a principal of order which does not need to demonstrate its practical utility in order to be justified (Bourdieu 1984:387).

● I think that in terms of symbolic domination, resistance is [...] difficult, since it is something you absorb like air, something you don't feel pressured by; it is everywhere and nowhere, and to escape from that is very difficult. Workers are under this kind of invisible pressure, and so they become much more adapted to their situation than we can believe (Bourdieu & Eagleton 1992:115).

● *Wayne*: Yeah, there is too much judging. Like people, you [referring to the moderator] are saying 'what kind of people would go to the theatre?' and we

would, like not through any fault of anybody's, but if we went to the theatre and watched them walking out we'd be judging them as geeks.

*Kev*: And they'd be judging us.

*Wayne*: Yeah, like, 'look at the piss-heads'.

*Moderator*: What's your definition of a geek, just roughly?

*Wayne*: Just somebody who doesn't know how to have any fun.

*Steve*: Doesn't seem to have fun. Just does boring things.

*Kev*: Doesn't like a laugh.

*Daz*: Just someone who's opposite to us.

*Wayne*: Probably somebody who's quite happy in themselves but we'd call them a geek and they'd call us piss-heads or bum or something.

*Moderator*: Yes. And would that put you off going to these places?

*Wayne*: No. I don't really care about the opinion of anybody. Everybody has got their own opinion. (Bennett et al 2009: 209-210)

## Introduction

Pierre Bourdieu's significance for the current revitalisation of class analysis in general and 'the cultural turn' in particular (e.g. Skeggs 1997, 2004; Savage 2000; *Sociology* 2005; Devine et al 2005; Bennett et al 2009; Prieur et al 2008; Prieur & Rosenlund 2010; Skjøl-Larsen 2008; Faber 2010), can hardly be overestimated.<sup>1</sup> The 'cultural turn' in class analysis im-

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<sup>1</sup> Despite the success of the Bourdieuan perspective, his legacy remains controversial (Silva & Warde 2010). Jean-Pascal Daloz (2007:66) recently observed how 'one hastily is labelled pro or anti-Bourdieuian'. He almost had an article rejected in an international journal because one reviewer thought he was unfair to Bourdieu whilst the other found his article insufficiently critical of Bourdieu's methodology – theoretically both reviewers could be right, of course, but the case is an illustrative example of the deep disagreement about the soundness of Bourdieu's scholarship. The

plies that class is no longer merely linked to one-dimensional categories of stratification such as income, employment or educational achievement, as the 'employment aggregate approach' (Crompton 1998) traditionally has done. Instead, it is argued, class analysis must be linked to cultural practices and identity (Skeggs 1997, Savage 2000, Devine et al 2005). From this perspective class analysis is not an exercise in deducing socio-economic variables. Class is implicit (Savage 2000:107), and empirically detected via ongoing (dis)identifications in the cultural practices of social actors. The force of this approach, which is based on Bourdieu's (1984, 1985, 1987, 1989, 1997a) *relational* and *dispositional* understanding of class *practice*, is, that a space of *homologous* class practices can be identified relationally to other positions of classed practices – even if the individual(ized) social actors do not experience being neither a 'class-an-sich' nor a mobilized 'class-für-such' in their everyday lives.<sup>2</sup> Hereby Bourdieu sidesteps the 'structure-consciousness-action-model' and the problem with lacking class-awareness, which has been troubling 'traditional' Marxist and Weberian class approaches in recent years. However, objective classes do not exist fully realized elsewhere than on the paper of the researcher.<sup>3</sup>

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renowned Oxford-Class-Analyst John Goldthorpe (2007:1f.) recently noted, in an acerbic comment, that 'Bourdieu's work can be understood as 'normal science' within an established paradigm of educational sociology'. Goldthorpe (2007:note 1) further noted that critical commentators are facing the problem of the recurrent obscurity of Bourdieu's prose and the deep, and what he believes to be a willed, ambiguity in Bourdieu's argument which always makes critical commentators vulnerable of charges of having misunderstood or misrepresented Bourdieu. This, by the way, also subsequently happened to Goldthorpe's general attack on Bourdieu's framework (in a similar vain, see also the debate between Richard Jenkins (1989) and Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992: 169f.; see also the preface in Jenkins 2002 and Jenkins 2010).

<sup>2</sup> "A social class (in-itself) – a class of identical or similar conditions of existence and conditionings – is at the same time a class of biological individuals having the same habitus, understood as a system of dispositions common to all products of the same conditionings. Though it is impossible for all (or even two) members of the same class to have had the same experiences, in the same order, it is certain that each member of the same class is more likely than any member of any other class to have been confronted with the situations most frequent for the members of that class" (Bourdieu 1990:59f).

<sup>3</sup> It is important to note that Bourdieu uses the notions 'social group' and 'class' interchangeably. A social class is, as we have seen, nothing but an objective or subjective social formation in the social space, in which members share similar (homological) habitual dispositions. Hence Bourdieu often refers to classes in the plural. There is not one but several 'dominant classes' within the two dominant class fractions – the power field - in social space. Because classes do not have a real existence anywhere but on the researcher's paper, it is consequently problematic with categories such as 'working class' or 'working classes' since these terminologically don't break with the everyday or Marxist common sense. This *analytical* category hence risks being perceived as real.

One of the key features of the three dimensional social space is that it simultaneously accounts for social stratification and differentiation. Moreover, Bourdieu's concepts of 'habitus' and 'field' allow us to explain the mechanisms behind these, respectively, vertical and horizontal modes of differentiation. Bourdieu's multidimensional class approach is an attempt to reconstruct Weber's classical distinction between 'class' and 'stand' (Bourdieu 1984:xii). But, contrary to Weber's rationalistic perception of the modern man, Bourdieu's theory of practice argues that social actors are primarily driven by practical logic, and practical modes of perceiving and being in the social world. Moreover, social actors are constantly struggling to control the fundamentally social categories of perception.<sup>4</sup> From Bourdieu's praxeological perspective, class is omnipresent in social practices, both in the terms of a (positive) identification (material and cultural) and especially negative symbolic boundaries, negation or more or less militant disidentifications with other groups or social practices (Bourdieu 1984:56, 475-79).<sup>5</sup>

Although Bourdieu's framework has a tendency to reduce cultural forms to the specific material bases and have a relatively instrumental orientation to culture, and an economic determinism still underpins his account of the relation between class and culture (Devine & Savage 2000:193; Alexander 1995 chapter 4; Sayer 1999), his concept of field and differentiated forms of capital has some clear advantages to the traditional approaches to class analysis. Most importantly, Bourdieu does not reduce class to economic relations or position in the division of labour (Savage et al 2005:41).<sup>6</sup> By stressing the importance of linking capital and field – or rather the fundamentally dialectical relationship between the two - the institutional

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<sup>4</sup> Symbolic struggles are thus the epicentre in Bourdieu's entire thinking. As Loïc Wacquant (1993:1) has noted: "Once we admit that 'no domination can maintain itself without making itself recognized by making the arbitrary which is at its base be misrecognized' (Bourdieu and de Saint Martin, 1978:76) Bourdieu's entire oeuvre may be read as a quest to explicate the specificity and potency of symbolic capital." (see also Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992:119 note 73).

<sup>5</sup> This implies, methodologically, that when analysing class practice, it is equally important to ask for and observe boundaries as to whom and what people do *not* identify with. Many qualitative and quantitative studies have indicated that people are often better at pointing to whom and what they do not identify with and dislike than vice versa.

<sup>6</sup> A vast series of commentators have eagerly stressed how the concept of habitus makes Bourdieu's framework deterministic. Though a few criticisms are persuasive (e.g. Bennett 2007), most charges of determinism are somewhat dubious to my taste. I would follow Lois McNay (1999; 2000: chapter 2; 2001) in arguing that most commentators disregard the fundamentally *generative* action-orientation of the habitus.

basis of capital-value is highlighted. Furthermore, by recognising that economic capital cannot be analytically separated from other determinants, they, analytically, become *social* classes rather than only material classes. Hereby Bourdieu sidesteps the traditional unproductive Marxist debate about 'exploitation' or the Weberian discussion of 'rationality' by drawing our attention more towards the mechanisms behind accumulation and convertibility (ibid:42; see also Skeggs 2004:chapter 1-3). Commentators have also stressed that Bourdieu's conception of class offers an understanding of social change and the restructuring of class relations, which withstand the problems that supporters of grand narratives like 'individualisation' and 'globalisation' have raised against the adequacy of class analysis (see e.g. Savage 2000:151).<sup>7</sup>

### The focus of the paper

The remainder of this paper explores the anthropological and lived experiences of class and symbolic domination. According to Bourdieu human beings are fundamentally *social* beings whose primary leitmotiv is the struggle for recognition (symbolic capital). Social life contains an 'energy of social physics' (Bourdieu 1990:122), that is, every social group constantly strives to accumulate, and, whenever possible, monopolise capital with which they may bolster or enhance their position in society (Wacquant 1987:69).

Bourdieu's scholarship was driven by his constant astonishments of 'the paradox of doxa' – the fact that the order of the world as we find it, with all its injustice and intolerable conditions, is predominantly perceived as acceptable and natural (Bourdieu 2001:1). His explanation to this paradox was that the habitual adjustment to the structural (class)position produces a mainly unconscious, and even voluntary, submission to symbolic violence. Symbolic systems are not only instruments of knowledge but also instruments of domination (Wacquant 1992:13; Bourdieu 1984: 471,477). Hence, Bourdieu understood symbolic power as "the capacity to impose and inculcate means of understanding and structuring the world, or symbolic systems, that contribute to the reproduction of the social order by representing economic and political power in disguised forms that endow them with legitimacy and/or taken-for-grantedness" (Wacquant 1987:66). Symbolic power is thus fundamentally 'world-making power' (Bourdieu 1987:13; 1977:171-

83; 1990:112-121; 2001:166). Bourdieu's general point is that the legitimate principals of legitimation – the categories of perception, classificatory schemes or dominant principals of domination – are generally in favour of the dominating classes. They are constructed and reproduced via 'the fields of power', that is, among actors that are already recognised as most distinctive in a given social space (Bourdieu 1984; 1996).

Although Bourdieu recognises that symbolic power cannot be exercised without *participation* from those suffering from it, he was, nevertheless, extremely sceptical towards countercultural or subcultural-theories suggesting resistance towards 'the legitimate taste'. Confronted directly Bourdieu did recognize that "the dominated, in any social universe, can always exert a certain force" (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992:80), that is, any agent always has a range of possible responses or 'margin of freedom' (Bourdieu 2000:235), or a space of creative agency, in any situation. However, throughout his scholarship he repeatedly accused studies suggesting an existence of autonomous working-class culture of being romantic – they supposedly disregard the ways most symbolic domination works unconsciously, invisibly and is absorbed like air.<sup>8</sup> Discussions about 'the people' or the 'popular' are primarily issues at stake between intellectuals, Bourdieu (1990b:150-156) maintains. Consequently effectual struggles of resistance and countercultures are only possible *via* legitimate cultural fields – and when popular culture is present in the legitimate fields, it is mostly represented by intellectuals who are forgetting the habitual difference between themselves and the working class (ibid).<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> The cultural perspective which Mike Savage, Beverley Skeggs, etc. represent has also been criticized for taking cultural practices perspective and identity too far at the expense of economic inequality (see e.g. Crompton & Scott 2005; Scott 2002; Fraser 2000).

<sup>8</sup> E.g. the first quotation in the very beginning of the paper, or in the lecture 'The uses of the 'people'' (1990b:155) given at the Lausanne colloquium on sociology and history of art in 1982, where Bourdieu asks and argues: "When the dominated quest for distinction leads the dominated to affirm what distinguishes them, that is, that in the name of which they are dominated and constituted as vulgar, do we have to talk of resistance? In other words, if, in order to resist, I have no other resource than to lay claim to that in the name of which I am dominated, is this resistance? Second question: when, on the other hand, the dominated work at destroying what marks them out as 'vulgar' and at appropriation that in relation to which they appear as 'vulgar' (for instance in France, the Parisian accent), is this submission? I think this is an insoluble contradiction: this contradiction is something those who talk about 'popular culture' won't admit. Resistance may be alienation and submission may be liberation. ... Resistance occur on terrains altogether different from that of culture in the strictest sense of the work – where it is never the possession of the most destitute, witness all the forms of 'counter-culture' that, as I could show, always presuppose a certain cultural capital. And it takes the most unexpected forms, to the point of remaining more or less invisible to the cultivated eye".

<sup>9</sup> Bourdieu's perception of domination has been subject to massive criticism for being too deterministic neglecting all the omnipresent

### Taste of the necessary?

The popular realism which inclines working people to reduce practices to the reality of their function, to do what they do, and be what they are ('That's the way I am'), without 'kidding themselves' ('That's the way it is'), and practical materialism which inclines them to censor the expression of feelings or to divert emotions into violence or oaths, are near-perfect antithesis of the aesthetical disavowal which, by a sort of essential hypocrisy (seen, for example, in the opposition between pornography and eroticism) makes the interest in function by the primacy given to form, so what people do, they do as if they were not doing it (Bourdieu 1984:200).

In *Distinction*, especially in chapters 3 and 7, Bourdieu characterises the taste of the 'dominated' or 'popular' classes as 'the taste of the necessary'. But due to insufficient data-material and the conviction that economic constraints make the consumption of 'the popular classes' less differentiated, Bourdieu does not include 'the popular classes' in the correspondence analysis constructing the social space. Besides a few occasional striking passages, such as that quoted above, Bourdieu does not describe the cultural practises of 'the popular classes' as exhaustively as those of the 'dominant classes' or those of the pretentious and often anxiously good willed middle classes. Instead Bourdieu mainly devotes his attention to *the effect of domination in Distinction*.

'The taste of the necessary' is predominately pragmatic and functional because of material (and subsequently cultural) restrictions. Hence "...nothing is more alien to the working-class woman than the typically bourgeois ideal of making each object in the home the occasion for an aesthetic choice [...] Men especially are forbidden every sort of 'pretension' in matters of culture, language or clothing" (ibid: 379,383). 'The popular classes' cannot invest in distinction and thus develop other ideals - for instance the virtue of 'value for money' or presentation of forbidden goods as 'bargains' (1984:200, 378, 380). Bourdieu's description of the 'popular classes' is based on the assumption that their material position, and their normative assimilation to it, does not allow them to have a distinguished taste. Consequently the choices of 'the popular classes' are both economically and normatively governed by a pragmatic ideology of *function* rather than aesthetics.<sup>10</sup> 'Choices of the ne-

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sources of resistance. I will not, however, go further in to that debate (see e.g. the references in Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992:79f, notes 20,24).

<sup>10</sup> This point has been severely criticised even among commentators who are generally sympathetic towards Bourdieu conceptual

cessary' unavoidably become excluding because they, both within the symbolic order and mental structures of the actors in the social space, operate as the antithesis *par excellence* to the aesthetically driven 'legitimate taste'.

Although being restricted and excluding, Bourdieu repeatedly observes an ethos of 'bon vivant' in the 'popular classes' (e.g.1984:179, 194-196, 382-384). This is especially evident in relation to food and the body.<sup>11</sup> This (partial?) freedom, or absence of highbrow cultural-*illusio*, is contrasted to the pretentious (and thus symbolically more dominated?) lifestyles of the middle classes. The order of cultural and symbolical legitimacy in *Distinction* therefore seems rather paradoxical. On the one hand 'the dominated' or 'popular' classes are somewhat liberated from the weight of 'the legitimate taste'. Whereas the pretentious middle classes are constantly aware of the code of distinction and thus feel the weight of 'the legitimate taste', 'the dominated' or 'popular' classes, on the other hand, don't have the same knowledge of and *illusio* for the cultural games of distinction - instead they often allow themselves to find highbrow culture downright boring.<sup>12</sup> One may read as if their quasi-deliberate self-exclusion from the symbolic games of cultural distinction makes 'the popular classes' less obsessed with marks of cultural distinction. This liberates 'the popular classes' from some of the 'status anxiety' experienced so frequently in middle classes and in the dominated fraction of the dominant classes (see also Pahl 1995). Bourdieu is definitely right in arguing that cultural exclusion, following 'vulgar taste', often does make mobility more difficult and often inaccessible. But in the end domination and legitimacy in Bourdieu's scholarship is first and foremost analysed and perceived as a one dimensional and inescapable phenomenon for agents outside the field of power.

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framework (e.g. Lamont & Lareau 1988:157; Swartz 1997:82,167-176; Jenkins 2002:148-149; Prieur 2002:122; Devine & Savage 2005:16; Bennett et al 2009:71,195-213).

<sup>11</sup> "In the working classes, fish tends to be regarded as unsuitable food for men, not only because it is light food, insufficiently 'filling', which would only be cooked for health reasons, i.e., for invalids and children, but also, like fruit (except bananas) it is one of the 'fiddly' things, which a man's hands cannot cope with and makes him look childlike[...] but above all, it is because fish has to be eaten in a way which totally contradicts the masculine way of eating, that is, with restraint, in small mouthfuls, chewed gently, with the front of the mouth, on the tips of the teeth... The working class meal is characterized by plenty [...] and above all by freedom" (ibid:190,194).

<sup>12</sup> As in the quotation from the British focus group interview in the very beginning of this paper, where the group of working class respondents find it legitimate to consider the so called 'legitimate taste' as geeky.

### To he who only has a hammer...

Although Bourdieu has a brilliant eye for the mechanism behind modes of class reproduction, stigmatization and submission to domination, he perhaps bends the stick a little too much. Bourdieu's domination logic in *Distinction* is apt to underestimate the possibility of symbolic autonomy in the so called 'dominated classes' because his argumentation remains within the cultural assumptions of the cultural elite. He, consequently, underestimates the resources available to people from the lower social classes (Savage 2000:109f; Jenkins 2002; Prieur 1998). Even if this is a deliberate choice (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992), the one-dimensional model of domination appears insufficiently dialectical to treat strategies of subversion adequately (Wacquant 1987:81). This ultimately makes it difficult for the *Distinction*-model to grasp 'popular culture' and orders of popular legitimacy adequately (Fiske 1989a). Moreover, whereas resistance requires a stake (*illusio*) in the field, autonomy does not. Autonomy is on the other hand possible if the social actor does not have any stakes in the game.

Before moving on to scrutinise this issue further, via findings from an ethnographic fieldwork, I will briefly rehearse the existing literature on this particular issue.

Michèle Lamont (1992) argues convincingly that Bourdieu has a blind spot in relation to moral boundaries, and that many lower and working class people – especially in American but also France - think differently about achievement than Bourdieu suggests. Cultural differentiation does not always translate into domination and hierarchy, as presumed by Bourdieu. Thus, "Bourdieu allows no autonomy to moral discourse, which he implicitly conceives as necessarily subordinated to other principals of hierarchalization. He presumes that people stress moral values only with the goal of improving their social position." (Ibid: 184). Furthermore, Bourdieu presumes that agents who value moral purity do so because they have no other alternative resource. They are consequently making morality a virtue of necessity. Moreover, the notion of 'power field' presumes that social fields are relatively closed and involve a stable set of powerful actors (ibid).

Recent empirical studies from various countries suggest that people with relatively low socioeconomic capital volume do not necessarily yearn for it. Nor do they *only* feel dominated. Instead they often emphasize moral ideals/-boundaries around issues such as the importance of personal integrity, maternity, family, friends, ect. (e.g. Skeggs 1997; Reay 1998; Lamont 2000; Skilbrei 2003; Faber 2008). This pro-

vides them with a sense of meaning in life and dignity (moral capital) in relation to other people. Moral perspectives occasionally allow them a feeling of *superiority* to people in 'the upper' and 'middle classes', who, from their perspective, are often lacking or compromising particular moral qualities. Ove Skarpenes (2007) suggests that the elite in Norway is 'omnivore' (Petersen & Kern 1996) and that cultural practices are not nearly as attached to cultural knowledge as to human qualities. Contrasting Bourdieu and several neobourdieusian studies, Skarpenes (2007) suggests that burden of justification, in Norway, is put on those who prefer rather inaccessible culture. Cultural preferences are "washed in the morale" Skarpenes argues – the 'legitimate culture' in Norway is a moral culture, even among those who are culturally privileged. In a similar vein Daloz (2007b) finds 'conspicuous modesty' a common phenomenon among the Norwegian, Swedish and Finnish elites.

These studies are probably demonstrating what Lamont (1989) alerts us when she argues that the symbolic significance of highbrow-culture is not equally important and equally 'bounded' in various countries. The US, Norway, Sweden, Finland and Denmark – where Lamont, Skilbrei, Skarpenes, Daloz and Faber have conducted their respective empirical research – are characterised by being 'loosely bounded' cultures (Lamont 1989:140f). On the other hand UK, Germany and ideal typically France have *historically* been more 'tightly bounded' cultures (ibid:138). This, of course, means that cultural capital and 'sense of distinction' is a relatively more valuable resource in 'tightly bounded cultures' than in 'loosely bounded cultures' where ideals of tolerance towards cultural differences are more dominating.

The major contemporary British *Culture, Class, Distinction* study argues that marks of cultural superiority are no longer straightforwardly ordered and one dimensional (Bennett et al 2009:71). Though the cultural engaged are noticeably more culturally confident, they are generally not snobberies and don't feel a sense of cultural superiority (ibid: 66; Warde & Bennett 2007). The 'culturally underprivileged', on the other hand, don't express any awe towards refinement (Bennett et al 2009: 205). The study concludes that a 'legitimate culture' is, allegedly, still definable. And, although most members of the working class are detached (rather than excluded) from 'the legitimate culture', they are nevertheless positioned by it (Ibid:212). However, and most importantly for the present discussion, "the working class does not emphasise the unfairness of a cultural hierarchy, and presumably, therefore, does not believe

that the command of legitimate culture is a source of privilege to which it is denied access [...] legitimate culture has less importance in the UK than Bourdieusian interpretations would expect” (ibid: 253).

Few of the mentioned studies above set out to research autonomy as such. In many of the cases it was an empirical finding within a larger study of culture and class.

### An ethnographic exploration

One of the most important questions regarding class and symbolic domination concerns the degree to which class position is allowing or restricting/excluding social actors from living the life they value as 'the good life', and the degree to which some social actors' aspirations about the good life come at the expense of the life chances of other actors. Social differentiation and modes of stratification are problematic, at an individual level, if people feel that they cannot make a 'respectable' living (Skeggs 1997), or if they are excluded from key arenas where struggles of (self)recognition are taking place (Taylor 1994; McNay 2007). The reason why I, unlike most contemporary class studies, stress the importance of people's own aspirations for 'the good life' is, partly, to encourage an analysis of moral dimensions of everyday life and class (Sayer 2005). But even more importantly, I wish to keep the option open that the mobility and class struggle, which is often *a priori* assumed to exist in social life, might not exclusively be fought in the education/occupation or in the economic fields – as generally assumed in class analysis.

In the following I will elaborate on the discussion outlined above via a few empirical tales from a recent small scale fieldwork conducted among public refuse collectors in a Danish city. The main ambition with the fieldwork was to reconstruct Bourdieu's perspective on cultural and moral legitimacy; in particular the dialectical relation between autonomy and domination of the popular classes discussed above. But the ambition was, furthermore, if possible, to answer the call for empirical recognition of some of the positive resources that also inhere in the cultures of the 'less privileged classes' (Jenkins 2002; Prieur 1998; Savage 2000).

The fieldwork was conducted following the principles of reflexive ethnography – especially those outlined by Burawoy (1991;1998), Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) and Bourdieu et al (1991). From this perspective it is crucial to break or at least deal with three types of socio-historical preconstructions: the scientific, the socio-cultural and the personal. In order to cope with the dominating scientific precon-

structions, I made as comprehensive a literature review as possible on 'working class culture' and masculinity in general and refuse collectors in particular. To enhance reflexivity and sensitivity towards theoretical shortcomings, I followed Burawoy's (1991a: 9) recommendation and outlined as coherently as possible, *before* entering, what I, based on bodies of existing research, especially Bourdieu (1984), expected to find in the field.<sup>13</sup> This enhanced sensitivity towards empirical violations of existing theory. In order to break with the socio-cultural preconstruction of the refuse collectors, I also made a discourse analysis of how refuse collectors are represented in the media, by one of the largest Danish companies, and on the website of the labour union (Kyed 2009:34-36). Lastly, I make a list of my personal idiosyncratic perceptions of the job and then tried to anticipate how my personal and scientific habitus could blind me towards the refuse collectors' particular interests in the world.

I chose this specific occupation because the job is characterized by being physically demanding, 'dirty' (Hughes 1984), unskilled, exclusively 'male' and most importantly; very low status. The occupational stigma<sup>14</sup> and perceived taint of the dirty occupation is apt to be projected onto the workers so that they are seen to personify dirt (Ashforth & Kreiner 1999:417; Douglas 1966). In relation to symbolic domination, the job does not provide the refuse collectors with a discursive 'status shield' (Hochschild 2003:174-181; Smith & Klineman 1989; Stenross & Kleinman 1989) as for instance the job as firefighter does (Tracy & Scott 2006). On the other hand, however, refuse collectors are reasonably paid and not part of a raggedy

<sup>13</sup> This method has many resemblances to Bourdieu's observation that: "The fundamental scientific act is the construction of the object; you don't move to the real without a hypothesis, without instruments of construction. And when you think you are without any presuppositions, you still construct without knowing it and, in that case, almost always inadequately" (1991:248).

<sup>14</sup> Several empirical studies have emphasized that the occupational stigma and lack of public recognition is the worst thing about the job as refuse collector (Perry 1998:107ff; Godschalk 1979). Some studies report how the refuse collectors change their working clothes to hide their occupation from their neighbours (Sanders 1981:32; Walsh 1975:14), while other refuse collectors are embarrassed about emptying bins near schools and bus stops where they risk getting in touch with other people (Godschalk 1979:6). Godschalk notes that: "The combination of having to serve others, removing their garbage, and this in the full view of everybody, probably determine the low status of the dustman. That the work is important to public health and that it can be highly paid, as in New York where the garbageman earns the salary of a professor in a small college, does not appear to carry any weight. Being the inferior servant concerned with everybody's refuse and dirt appears to be decisive [...] The dustman is a menial of whom no-one is willing to take much account [...] This treatment by the public keeps the dustman in a state of constant awareness of his low status" (1979:4,5).

proletariat – or *lumpenproletariat* as described by Marx – where it would be tautological to find immense domination and little autonomy (e.g. Charlesworth 2000). Thus, if I could find autonomy here, it is reasonable to assume that it has some general validity. I also assumed that the nature of the work would make it possible to study how ideals of masculinity and 'physical capital' (Shilling 1991; 2004) correlate with class in an occupational setting – it has often been argued that physical strength and masculinity is the last refuge for the identity of 'the dominated classes' today (e.g. Bourdieu 1984:384; 1993:4; Willis 1977; Collinson 1988; Prieur 1998). Furthermore, the specific relationship between class, culture and masculinity in an occupational setting has not yet been subjected to ethnographic analysis in Denmark – as far as I know of.

A recent survey has suggested that refuse collector is the 10th least prestigious job out of 97 possible jobs in contemporary Denmark (Ugebrevet A4, Vol. 36, 23/10 2006:11). Being refuse collector is in every way in contrast to what is generally considered the most prestigious creative and medical occupations in Denmark.<sup>15</sup> The case accordingly represents an a priori assumption that if positions (occupations) exposed to symbolic violence in the contemporary Danish welfare state exist, refuse collectors ought to make an excellent example.<sup>16</sup>

In order to focus the fieldwork I formulated two empirical research questions:

- 1) *How are aspirations about 'the good life' and positive self identification constructed in a lowly estimated position in society?*
- 2) *In what ways do domination and autonomy exist in relation to 'the legitimate taste' in the lived everyday life, and which symbolic boundaries are used to create autonomy?*

The data-material consists of two weeks of *participant* observation among refuse collectors in the municipal garbage department. First, I followed a gang of four refuse collectors collecting 'municipal waste' for

six working days.<sup>17</sup> Afterwards I participated in another gang collecting 'big waste' items for four days with two guys (Ib and Karl). During the fieldwork I also conducted an interview with Helle; the administrative leader of the gangs. I did not inform the refuse collectors that I was in the field to study class or symbolic domination and autonomy, since I imagined this scholastic interest would 'other' me too much and would be too disturbing for such a relatively concise fieldwork. I informed them that I was writing a thesis on culture in 'male workplaces', and, as a case, I was interested in what it is like to be a refuse collector. They all recognised that I had come to the right place. However, it was obvious from some of their subsequent questions that they did not fully understand the nature of academic fieldwork. They, for instance, asked me if everybody in the university would have to go through such 'work experience'.

After leaving the field I conducted three 1 ½-2 hour semi-structured interviews with three of the guys I followed in the field. This gave me an opportunity to elaborate on my field notes, but it also created a more relaxed and trusting atmosphere around the 'interview situation'. This is crucial when interviewing about such an embarrassing and unsettling subject as class (Sayer 2005:1; Savage 2000:115-117; Savage et al 2005a: 11; Skeggs 1997: chapter 5; Faber 2008:100-103), even if nearly every question about class was asked indirectly given the implicit nature of the phenomenon.

Using Burawoy's 'the extended case methodology', I was interested in understanding and explaining how this particular class position is experienced and how cultural, symbolic and moral identity aspects are created and dealt with within particular macro-level structures.

During the fieldwork I got a rather undisturbed picture of their everyday life at work. The refuse collectors I followed were mostly open and straight forward, at least after the first couple of hours of ice-breaking rituals. Albeit the fieldwork was short and not nearly extensive enough to get a full/native understanding of the field and of the tacit rules and assumptions in the field, I did get a reasonable impression of the culture. In the subsequent interviews, I asked them if or how they thought the everyday had been disturbed by my presence. They all refused that it had any effect. They explained that it was nice to have a visitor who even participated in their work.

<sup>15</sup> 1:Pilot, 2:Lawyer, 3:Medical doctor in the private sector, 4:Medical doctor in a hospital, 5:Scientist in the private sector, 6:Associated professor in the university, 7:Midwife, 8:Architect, 9:Dentist, 10:Engineer (Ugebrevet A4, Vol. 36, 23/10 2006:12)).

<sup>16</sup> Before I went in to the field I was not aware, however, that this was one of the few municipalities left in Denmark where waste collection has not yet been outsourced to private contractors. Waste is the most outsourced area in the Danish public sector today (Busck 2007).

<sup>17</sup> Three permanent: "Kurt", "Ejner" and "Bobby", and a substitute one of the days: "Anders".

Both by the end of my fieldwork and during interviews, I was asked by the refuse collectors if I would consider getting a job there. It is difficult what to make of such a question. I choose to interpret it as if they liked me, and that they did not see me as belonging socially or culturally to a different class. But also, that they didn't consider an academic degree in sociology as something disqualifying for a potential refuse collector *in spe*. It clearly indicates, however, certain ignorance about what the social or perhaps better occupational world looks like from a different 'objective' class position than their own in the social space.

### Doing dirty work

Each route has its own possibilities; the early morning life varies from district to district. Yet, whatever the district, the scavenger comes to know a lot about the neighbourhood. Life along his route takes on the quality of a continuing story. You watch children growing up, older folks getting more timed, a house deteriorating, another being rehabilitated; and there is a certain stability to witnessing that sort of continuity and evolution. The garbageman can develop the same appreciation for his route that others develop for soap opera or the familiar charters of a television sit-com. That kind of continuity can be reassuring in a world of change. [...] Dirty work gives entry to the underside of life. One has access to special information that others do not. Even a respectable-looking house in a fine neighbourhood does not hide the alcoholism that a garbageman can read into the number of liquor bottles he takes out (Perry 1998: 111ff).

One of the first things that struck me doing the fieldwork was how satisfied the refuse collectors seemed to be with their job and overall structural situation. Although the refuse collector in Denmark, as in other countries (Godschalk 1979:3; Sanders 1981:31), is an institutionalised typecast of a dirty thick chap, they all seemed at ease with being 'bin men'. They felt no need to make excuses, explanations, justifications or 'contre coups' (Hughes 1984:344).<sup>18</sup> They felt that they had a good job be-

<sup>18</sup> In the beginning of the fieldwork I was, given the dirty stigma, amazed that the refuse collectors would go through the waist looking for returnable bottles in the middle of the busy streets in the city centre; while waiting for the waist truck. This is hardly beneficial for their social validation given the occupational stigma. But it goes to show that the refuse collectors do not fear 'the gaze of the other' and are not terribly troubled by the dirty stigma of the job - to paraphrase Newman (1999) - *there is no shame in their dirty game*.

cause: The wage is reasonable<sup>19</sup>, they worked outside all day while getting fresh air and exercise, they were not imprisoned in an office all day, they had no boss looking over their shoulder telling them what to do and they were off from work between 10-11 am everyday, unless they chose to work overtime and earn some extra money or time off. Neither did they feel alienated nor bored stiff in the same manner as reported in many classical shop-floor studies (e.g. Bravermann 1974; Willis 1979). Instead they all referred to *freedom* as the best thing about the job.

'Anders' is 33 years old. He is born and bred in an apartment in the heart of the city by working-class parents. He has been a refuse collector in the 'reserve staff' for 4 years. As a youngster he loved to come to work with his uncle, who was also a refuse collector for many years - actually on exactly the same route as I met Anders. Before becoming a refuse collector Anders worked in a slaughterhouse for nine years, and previous to that he had 3 years vocational training as an auto-mechanic. But he resigned six months before his apprenticeship test because he got fed up with the electronic part of the craft, and would rather, at the time, earn more money next to his brother in a slaughterhouse. At 20 he bought an old farm, where the interview is taking place, and where he still lives by himself along with his two dogs. At the time of the interview, he was renovating the plus 300 square meter farmhouse by himself. Slowly he told me, but skillfully I would add. He owns 27 acres of land and forest around the farm where he loves to go hunting with friends and family. He has been a keen hunter since he was 16 and claims to have shot everything there is to shoot in Denmark.

Regarding the job Anders explains:

— I'm damn happy to be there ... I know there are many people out there who complain and say they cannot endure this and they cannot endure that. But there are also many out there, who have never really tried to have a slogging-job ... who have been there forever. They don't know how nice they've got it ... I know it can be a stressful job, depending on what you do, but it is nothing compared to being in a slaughterhouse. It is not...

— *You told me, out on the route, that it was a much more static work at the slaughterhouse...*

— It was ... I got damn painful in my back and legs, when I was standing there each and every day. It was

<sup>19</sup> They earn between 20.000-27.000 kr. a month before taxes. This is around an average Danish wage, but it's much less than the refuse collectors employed by private contractors are earning.



bloody so that, when you came home, it was directly to the couch and lie there for a couple hours. After I've come out and carry garbage, and get all that exercise, I never have backache anymore. I don't.<sup>20</sup>

And at some other point during the interview:

— I feel better, when I get up in the morning, and get started. You feel so good, when you come home after being in a high gear most of the day ... it's as if you get more energy the more you do... it's really something I appreciate, after having been in the slaughterhouse so long. It was a nightmare every morning, when you had to get up...

— *Okay, you simply didn't want to do it. It was just something you had to overcome?*

— Nobody wanted to do it! There was a bloody sickness absence of another world in such a slaughterhouse. It's absolutely crazy. It's also well known in advance, that's also why nobody was fired. They knew that it was difficult to find new people ... and all the accidents that happened ... someone cutting his artery ... You stand next to your buddy, who has one in training, and then he cuts half through his arm. Afterwards, when you come home and lay on the couch, you picture it for yourself - then you might as well get up. It was like that in the end. So I'm happy not to be there anymore. It was lucky that they had to close. It was no joke ...

It is obvious how working as a refuse collector, in Anders' awareness, is positioned *relationally* against the many years in the slaughterhouse, which are felt both on and in his body. Anders expresses a relief that the slaughterhouse had to close, so he was 'liberated'. At several points during the interview, he draws symbolic boundaries where the slaughterhouse symbolizes static and dangerous drudgery, while working as a refuse collector appears to be free, vibrant and healthy. Although working at the slaughterhouse was much better paid, it cannot compensate for the freedom he feels as a refuse collector. Moreover, fatigue from work no longer 'colonizes' his much valued free time (and health). The freedom Anders and his colleagues so often refers to may correspond to the 'freedom in manual work' observed by Sennett & Cobb

<sup>20</sup> One of the reviewers rightly argued that the interview-quotations are very 'Danish tuned', and thus suggested that revision by a Danish reading native speaker would improve it. I have however chosen to maintain the particular Danish tone as much possible, because I think it contributes with both authenticity and specific untranslatable class-connotations, that are of value for those of the readers who are able to read Danish and decode the particular 'Jutlandic-working-class speech-mode' in the quotations.

(1972:235-240). It also corresponds well with Michael Schwalbe's (1985) observation about the connection between autonomy in work and self-esteem.

The waste industry is perhaps to a certain extent unique compared to many other unskilled industries which typically have been rationalised enormously and outsourced internationally throughout the last couple of decades (as for instance Danish slaughterhouses). From an organizational perspective the refuse collectors were not meticulously controlled by (over)-rationalized time schedules. This is possibly an important structural condition for this 'freedom'.

### Cultural in-distinction

From reading various, mostly Anglophone working class ethnographies, I expected that the refuse collectors would be making jokes, comments or other types of symbolic, cultural or moral boundaries towards the 'customers', each other<sup>21</sup> and perhaps me (the outsider from the University who was trying to 'objectify' or 'other' them and their work). But there was surprisingly little of that. They did not construct their personal nor collective identity through an articulated dis-identification with others. All my 'identity questions', both in the field and during the interviews, were most successful when formulated positively. The refuse collectors had a strong ethos of tolerance. Most of them were clearly uncomfortable about drawing boundaries, especially when asked more or less directly about dis-likes or dis-identifications. They would typically try to escape by saying: "I like all kinds of people", "I can talk to everybody", "I don't want to judge other people because everybody is entitled to their own opinion". This is somewhat opposite to Bourdieu's description of 'the principal of conformity' in 'the dominated classes' (Bourdieu 1984:380ff). Only one of the refuse collectors I came in touch with during the fieldwork was practising moral (class) control/-conformity. The other refuse collectors did not appreciate that, they explicitly rejected Kurt's tendency to judge other people.

The refuse collectors spoke little about woman, cars, sports and other stereotypical masculine issues during and in the breaks from work. Instead, most of the conversations concerned issues such as: news, TV, what they had been doing and experienced in their everyday life outside work, money, mortgages, tax refunds, and of course, not surprisingly; work related issues. Traditional macho-values such as toughness

<sup>21</sup> In John B. Coleman's (1977:33) short fieldwork among garbage men in New York they joked internally that: "All it takes to do this is a strong back, a weak mind and a good healthy cold in your nose".

also played a surprisingly modest role in the social interaction at work and in their construction of personal identity. Neither did their limited consumption of (popular)culture seem to be loaded with creative semiotic resistance as described by the (sub)cultural studies tradition (e.g. Hebdige 1979; de Certeau 1984; Fiske 1989a,b; During 1993; Story 1996;1999; 2009a,b). Cultural consumption generally plays a minor role in their construction of identity, except for a few leisure activities such as being hunters, owners of a summerhouse, caravans or allotment gardens. These sites represented bastions of freedom, not in a distinctive or symbolic ‘counter-cultural’ sense, but rather in a *functional* sense. They were enjoyed because of their pleasurable everyday ‘use-value’, not because of their exchange value on the symbolic market.<sup>22</sup> These leisure activities were associated with relaxation, freedom and pleasure, and thus in opposition to work, and perhaps indirectly also their perception of cultural field in general. It was via Nature and privacy, rather than through conflict and ‘popular cultural capital’ (Fiske 1987:314ff), they experienced *autonomy*.<sup>23</sup> This may be partly explained by the fact that all the refuse collectors, but “Anders”, were between the ages of 47-61. This is probably not the age-group most inclined to use cultural consumption creatively in their identity construction. I will not dismiss that films, TV and novels do play a minor part, but the most significant autonomy certainly did not emerge from popular culture or from any institutionalised form of culture.

### Appreciating leisure

One of the key findings in the fieldwork was that although the refuse collectors were all happy with their job, they all value their leisure enormously. The value of leisure is not developed, and can scarcely be meaningfully captured as something valuable in Bourdieu’s framework. This also makes it difficult to capture e.g. the often documented resistances towards promotion (‘de-masculinization’) among men in ‘the working

classes’ (Benyon 1975:123f.; Sanders 1981:31; Collinson 1992:87; Collinson & Hearn 1996:69f).

An alternative and more adequate explanation is established in the works of Danish ethnologist Thomas Højrup (1983; 2004).<sup>24</sup> Following the Marxist tradition of structural dialectics combined with deep empirical investigation, Højrup seeks to develop a practice driven notion of ‘life-mode’ – as an alternative perspective of class, while analyzing cultural, political and ideological differences and conflicts, during the structural transformations, among ‘The Forgotten People’ (1989) in a rural area in the North-western part of Jutland in the late 1970’s. According to Højrup, society can be interpreted according to a complex of life-modes, each carrying its specific ideology reflecting a unitary class-specific system of practices (2004:17; 1983).<sup>25</sup> The character, advantage and disadvantage of each life-mode look entirely different when seen from perspective of a different life-mode. Højrup identifies three distinctive life-modes with several possible subdivisions which are specific to the structural formation of modern Scandinavian welfare societies.

First, there is the life-mode of the *self-employed*. For the self-employed “free time has no meaning: you are never free from work, because you are never put to work; instead you put yourself to work, you involve yourself in it, because this involvement is the prerequisite for and indeed the essence of being self-employed”.

Second, there is that of the *routine wage-worker*. Here the sole function of work is to provide him with an income that makes it possible to live a meaningful life during his free time. Here work is the antithesis of free time – there could be no such thing as ‘free time’ except in contrast to its antithesis ‘work’ – the two

<sup>22</sup> There is perhaps an exception with “Kurt” who, the first day out of the blue, proudly told me, that he had bought a summerhouse 1 ½ years ago (in Hals) *in cash!*, and that he expected to move there, when he would retire in six months. He was obviously and understandably proud to be able to buy a summerhouse in cash. This may be read as an attempt to demonstrate *embourgeoisement*.

<sup>23</sup> In this regard, I still find Bourdieu’s cultural perspective more suitable than much of body of work from the cultural studies tradition, although I did not find much distinctive use of culture and legitimisation struggles, as Bourdieu would have it. On the other hand, though, I also find some of the ‘power of pleasure’ arguments (e.g. Fiske 1989a:49-102) convincing in relation to the cultural practise of the refuse collectors. The body and pleasure is indeed *also* the Achilles heel of hegemony (Fiske 1989b:76).

<sup>24</sup> Højrup has published extensively in Danish, but of these are the only two publications available in English. Højrup’s references to Bourdieu are extremely rare but there are several resemblances between the two scholarships. It is however too complicated and beyond the scope of this paper to disentangle the similarities and differences between the two.

<sup>25</sup> “The purpose in combining these structural analyses in terms of modes of production with analysis of the life-modes of different population groups is to be able to investigate the manifold struggles among the life-modes for sustaining and reestablishing their necessary presuppositions. By developing life-modes in relation to the structural presuppositions which they themselves point to as necessary for their maintenance, it becomes possible to identify the ‘living conditions’ that the different population groups must perceive as essential and important to fight for. It follows from this analysis that it is never meaningful to speak in general terms about “living conditions”, since these must necessarily be specific to each life-mode. The presuppositions of different life-modes are not only different from each other, but are frequently in mutual contradiction. Therefore one must reject altogether the notion that there are universal human needs and values...” (Højrup 1983, note 2).

notions cannot exist without each other, but nor can they be fused together (1983; 2004:35). The meaning of work is structured around a means-end relationship where the end is leisure and the means is satisfactory money making. However, the more qualified the wage-worker is the less monotonous the work tends to be, and the less he experiences the contrast between work and free time (and vice versa).

Third, there is the life-mode of the *success or career-oriented wage-earner* (the career professional). According to Højrup, the career-oriented wage-worker does not attain greater freedom by becoming self-employed or by earning a higher wage to spend in his free time. He, rather, attains greater freedom in his work by becoming irreplaceable and by advancing in the corporate structure. To him free time is an absurdity since his involvement with the problems at hand is not confined to normal working hours, and he needs to use his time to develop his qualifications and cultivate personal relations that may be of importance to his future career. Just as success is one's own doing, so is failure, since it is ultimately perceived as a question of one's abilities.

Given these are ideal types in the Weberian sense, Højrup remarks that just because an employee works for a wage, it does not necessarily mean he belongs to the life-mode of the wage-worker (2004:42). However, in the following I will describe how the wage-worker life-mode, and the ideology connected to it, was incredibly common among the refuse collectors I spoke to. But more importantly, I find it useful in order to understand and explain their ideological autonomy from 'the legitimate taste'.<sup>26</sup>

During the fieldwork I always asked the refuse collectors if they took all the overtime they could get, and whether they chose to have overtime payment or time off. They all chose time off "*because freedom cannot be bought for money*", as they typically replied. This is interesting as they could often earn a twofold wage within a "normal" 8 hour working day - if they took overtime. Hence, they could actually make much additional money without having to work much later than 2.p.m.<sup>27</sup> This is in some ways opposite

to 'the affluent workers' described by Goldthorpe et al (1969) in which the lifestyle of the affluent workers depended heavily on the overtime payment.<sup>28</sup> There is a strong consciousness of freedom over affluence - or perhaps a bit more provocatively; freedom from affluence among the refuse collectors.

A brilliant example of an embodied wage-worker-perception of the world is evident in the interview with "Ejner". Ejner is a strikingly friendly and easy-going guy who "always has time to talk". He is 54 years old, and has been a refuse collector for 22 years. Previously, he worked as a labourer in various factories - one of which both his father and grandfather both worked for 40 years. Afterwards Ejner worked for the state gardener where he discovered the pleasure of working outdoor. He lives in a two bedroom apartment 500 meters from work with his girlfriend through five years. He has a 19 year old son, who lives with his mother - a woman he describes as unreasonably temperamental. Ejner and his current girlfriend spend almost every afternoon in his allotment garden or in their caravan, which is placed on a camp by the sea approximately 30 minutes drive from the city. He enjoys getting up at 4 am to have a quite morning with crosswords and coffee. In the following Ejner is drawing a symbolic boundary towards the self-employed life-mode of his brother, a former "computer man" now self-employed coach with 14 employees:

— ...he has always been in an office. He has also been at Nykredit [insurance company] and BRF [credit institute].

— *Yes, it's different what people like...*

— Yes "wouldn't you like that 'Ejner'", he said. "No, never. I am not going inside to sit anywhere. And I certainly don't want to have anything to do with computers. That's not me" - No, I fine with this. You know what this is. And when you are off, you can do whatever you like. You don't have to come home and sit in front of a computer and take care of this and take care of that and everything. No... it turns out that he hasn't even...he never comes out to visit anyone,

<sup>26</sup> A recent quantitative study on a representative data material (Holm & Jæger 2008) suggests that the wageworker and career-orientation are still identifiable in Denmark today. The data material, however, did not allow test of the self-employed life-mode. The study also documents that the wageworker life-mode has been decreasing whereas the career life-mode has been increasing. Contrary to Højrup and the argument in this study, Holm & Jæger did not find a strong life-mode-centrism. On the contrary they suggest that individuals may simultaneously carry a wageworker and career life-mode.

<sup>27</sup> Some of the youngsters did choose the extra money. I was also told that some refuse collectors did have extra jobs besides refuse

collection. But I did not talk to anyone who did. It is also noteworthy that the payment was much lower here than among the refuse collectors in private companies. The job security and working conditions were, on the contrary, much better here. This is probably also the reason why the majority of the refuse collectors here were at the age of 40 plus.

<sup>28</sup> There is, however, a resemblance between the refuse collectors I met and the affluent workers Goldthorpe et al interviewed. The refuse collectors were also privatised. Most of them lived in houses round the city, and they did not socialise much with their colleagues in their leisure time. Neither did they place much faith in the labour union.

because, then he is in Copenhagen, and last week he was in Germany...

— *So work takes all the time?*

— Yes.

— *And you appreciate the leisure?*

— Yes I do. Yes, yes... When you have worked for 5 or 6 hours that must be enough. You don't need to do computer work and stuff all night. No, that's not me.

The contrast between the perceptions of the 'good life' is evident. Ejner does not understand how it can be stimulating to spend one day after the other and sometimes even nights in front of a computer. Ejner neither has a structural position nor a habitus to appreciate the ideology that is driving his brother. Not only would Ejner hate to work in an office all day, he also considers work nothing more than a means to an end - leisure. Ejner does not distinguish between the notions of 'work' and 'career'. Hence, "*when you have worked for 5 or 6 hours that must be enough*". He does not recognise his brother's career as something stimulation in itself. Therefore a dedicated self-employed or career life-mode, where work and leisure fuses together, does not seem attractive to Ejner – work is *work* and consequently time away from the important aspects of life such as friends, family and enjoyment. He does not desire a time consuming career life-mode as that of his brother. "*No, that's not me*". He does not subscribe to the self-employed life-mode and consequently the same perception of 'work-life' or 'work-pleasure' or perhaps 'work-recognition-balance' as his brother does. The symbolic liberty of 'being off', when you are 'off' from work, is crucial to many working class men (see also Collinson 1992:95).

### **Choice of the necessary revisited... on the tracks of "the good life"**

— *...we have talked a little about it already. But what is a good life if you should say so. What are the important things and values?*

— If I have to say so, I think ... we have a very good life. We have everything we need; we have nothing to complain about. We can put money aside. We enjoy ourselves when we like to. We are happy with that.

— *You've always felt that you could fulfil your dreams and do the things you like?*

— Yes, the things I like.

— *That's nice...*

— Yes .. I have never been dissatisfied about that. Many people have asked: *Are you not dissatisfied that your younger brother earns so much money and this*

*and that?* Then I say; "Listen, we have the caravan, we have the allotment garden, we have a car and we have the money we need" we don't need anything. Then you cannot ask for more.

One could argue following a Bourdieusian interpretation that Ejner has successfully made a virtue out of class immobility – he has learned to 'make do' (de Certeau 1984) with what he has got. He, like most other social agents, has an embodied understanding of what he can expect in life and he is content with that. This strong correspondence between his habitual aspirations about "the good life" and his place in the social structure is perhaps not surprising since "we learn and incorporate into our habitus a sense of what we can 'reasonably' expect" (Calhoun 2002:276; Bourdieu 1987:5; 1990a:54ff; 2000:130, 231ff).<sup>29</sup> On the other hand, one can also read it as a straightforward resistance towards capitalism's ever increasing colonization of private life. By refusing to participate in distinction games, Ejner is liberated from some of the 'status anxiety', which is typical in some pretentious contemporary career-oriented middle class lifestyles (Bourdieu 1984, chapter 6; Pahl 1995). I do not think Ejner is denying what is denied to him only because it is denied to him. I rather think that Ejner is a modest and unpretentious man who enjoys 'simple living' in the most literal sense of the word. "He cannot ask for more". But most importantly, he will not sacrifice his valuable freedom and leisure. Whereas Ejner's brother and other knowledge professionals constantly struggle to improve their knowledge and personal skills in order to compete – or remain valuable – in the knowledge economy, Ejner who has been a refuse collector for 22 years is experiencing the increasingly rare pleasure of *predictability* (Sennett 1998;2006). Although Ejner's work as a refuse collector does not provide him with much power or symbolic capital in a modern knowledge society, it does provide him with a sense of stability and continuity. Working as a publicly employed refuse collector Ejner can, to a large extent, be the author of his own trajectory.

Bobby is 47 years old and also born and raised in the city. He has been married to a hairdresser, who was likewise born and raised in the city, for 16 years. Together they have two daughters. For the past 15 years they have been living in a house in a traditional family neighbourhood on the outskirts of the city.

<sup>29</sup> Arguably it is still a balance which many middle class people struggle to find in a contemporary individualised society where we are increasingly taught that "we are all our own happiness forging" (Pahl 1995).

Bobby was originally educated as a truck-mechanic. But since then he has worked as a fire-fighter, black smith and janitor before he became a refuse collector 5 years ago. When Bobby was a black-smith, he was stationed in Seattle by his company to work for 3 ½ years. In Seattle he worked between 14-16 hours a day which amounted to between 16-1800 hours of overtime a year. He is a keen hunter and has often been aboard on hunting trips both in Europe and in Zimbabwe where one of his friends has a farm. He likes to watch nature and animal programs in TV, but he does not like reality programs because of the way people are presented: "They put people on a pedestal and just to saw them down afterwards or force people to vote each other out on the basis of some small triviality or wrong word they may have said. I don't like that".

Albeit Bobby once earned a lot of money, or perhaps therefore, he knows money will not make him happy. In the interview Bobby reminds me that money is nice to have but "in the last suit you don't have any pockets". His conception of 'the good life', like that of Ejner, is somewhat unmaterialistic:

— How would you define "the good life". What does it mean for you? What is most important in a good life?

— What I appreciate most is my family and that I have a job. And then you can discuss...what I earn now in comparison to what I have earned, it is nothing. But it is not money that makes me happy. What makes me happy is that I do what I want to do. And like to be outdoor... and the freedom. I've got it almost as I like to have it. I will not be happy by going out to say that I have just purchased a new car for this much money, because within a fortnight it will be everyday again. And well, if only I can get from A to B - if I come to from one place to the other - it makes no difference to me. Those material values... it's not that.

— So you are happy and satisfied and feel that you have had good opportunities to create a good life?

— Definitely. If you are willing to do something you also have the possibility of doing it. When I travelled as a black smith... Well, I earned lots of money and instead of just wasting money on big cars and things like that - I haven't done that. I have saved some money and then said: "okay, now the possibility is here, so we will buy this [their house]. We can do this

together". And then they [employers] can actually go to hell if there is a problem.<sup>30</sup>

— So this way you might say that you saved for freedom?

— Yes. Why should I work hard all life? – I don't get that.

One could read this as if Bobby is indeed economically restricted by his position in the labour market, that he is putting utility and pragmatic concerns before aesthetics and distinction because his objective structural position and vulnerability in the labour market, and his subjective habitus, does not allow him to spend "extravagantly" but instead makes him appreciate what is practical, durable and sensible. That is hardly entirely wrong. What is interesting, though, is that Bobby does not wish to work for *filthy lucre*, anymore, because he knows that money will not make him happy – freedom, family and a rich leisure life does. This perception was also common among other refuse collectors I spoke to. Several had earlier been working for filthy lucre, but they chose not to anymore because freedom, leisure and family life seemed more attractive to them now. They do not measure their own success and dignity in relation to their volume of socio-economic capital. Success is rather a question of doing what you love to do.

### Concluding discussion

Sacrifice is the last resource of individualism, the last demonstration of competence. It is always available to you, because your desires are always a part of you. It is the most fundamental action you can perform that proves your ability to be in control; it is the final demonstration of virtue when all else fails (Sennett & Cobb 1972:140).

Resent research has suggested that the toolbox of *Distinction* remains powerful to explore contemporary social and cultural divisions in Denmark (Prieur et al 2008). However, "the highbrow are not as highbrow as in *Distinction*" (Prieur & Rosenlund 2010:74). Moreover, to the extent that a 'legitimate taste' exists in contemporary Denmark, it originates from the life-styles of the middle classes (Faber 2008).

The refuse collectors in my data, who clearly belonged to the 'underprivileged pole' of the fundamental set of nine cultural oppositions recently outlined by Prieur & Rosenlund (2010:71f.), were, however,

<sup>30</sup> Bobby has had several different jobs. It seemed to me that he easily got fed up with a job after a few years and then chose to quit the job "to try something else" as he explained. But after five years he's still happy about being a refuse collector and even wishes to stay until retirement if possible.

relatively unaware of the fact that their lifestyles are sometimes inconsistent with ‘the legitimate taste’ of the more privileged classes. Thus, the categories of perception do not seem to be universally and hierarchically structured throughout the entire Danish social space. The data material furthermore demonstrates the importance of understanding the symbolic class position of the refuse collectors *relationally*. The reason for this is threefold (Kyed 2009); first, all the refuse collectors I spoke to feel that refuse collection is the best job they have ever had. Second, the refuse collectors have the most desired job within the company. The refuse collectors thus hold a relatively high position in the internal hierarchy of the company providing them with a certain symbolic capital in this particular local structure. Thirdly, the refuse collectors – like most other people – primarily socialize with people of a relative similar class position, and in these situations the refuse collector experience that their work offers advantages other people lack. Moreover, although their income is not particularly low, the refuse collectors typically appraised humble lifestyles. This creates a certain distance and freedom from symbolic materialism and consumerism. The middle aged refuse collectors I meet did not want to participate in the almost mandatory middle class games of mass consumption where everybody seeks individual distinction while being just a slightly different copy of their neighbour in the ‘lifestyle enclave’ (Bellah et al 2008 [1985]).

Without falling into romanticism I find it reasonable to argue that they experience a sense of symbolic autonomy from the ‘legitimate taste’ because of a deeply embodied ‘wage-worker life-mode’ and an appreciation of simple living. Is this not just a case of ‘making do’ (de Certeau 1984), ‘popular realism’ and ‘taste of the necessary’, or a case of habitual adjustment to the social structures, as Bourdieu would have it? Probably to a certain extent, but my data also shows several deliberate choices not to earn more money, because, as Bobby reasoned earlier: “*in the last suit you don’t have any pockets*”. What is more, while people from the middle classes - anxious to satisfy the demands of ‘the legitimate taste’ but weighed down by a stressful everyday life caught between career, family, friends, and leisure activities – may be *reading* piles of popular books on ‘simple living’, the refuse collectors seem to actually *practice* it. The refuse collectors “know” that more money, power and responsibility will not make them happier, but a rich leisure life with their family and friends will. It is in these fields the refuse collectors seek recognition and manifest their personal dignity. Another

source for their autonomy is their general ignorance of what the social world looks like from a different class perspective than their own. Thus, contrary to Holm & Jæger’s (2008) quantitative findings, my qualitative data suggests that the refuse collectors experience a strong ‘wage-worker life-mode-centrism’. The life-mode of the wage-worker is largely in keeping with what research on happiness suggests being the soundest sources for lifetime satisfaction and well-being (e.g. Lane 1991).

In relation to Denmark as a class society, they all believed that Denmark is a meritocratic society. In addition to this believe, they expressed that they had been working hard to get into the position they are in today. Another indication suggesting that they do not perceive themselves as belonging to a dominated or underprivileged position. The refuse collectors found pride and dignity in their ability to support their family. My data also supports several other studies of the working man, both internationally and nationally, in that symbolic boundaries were solely drawn *downwards* in the class structure against the welfare-chiselers (e.g. Sennett & Cobb 1972; Lamont 2000; Skjøtt-Larsen 2008; Faber 2008). This symbolic boundary is critical to the refuse collectors because neither symbolically nor practically does the “welfare-chiselers” pay respect to the particular system of dignity – ethos of sacrifice and hard work – the refuse collectors find dignity in (see also Sennett and Cobb 1972:138).<sup>31</sup> On the other hand, they did not demonstrate any dislike with the privileged classes who, according to their conception of Denmark as an ‘open society, probably worked hard to get there, as they argued.

As a final remark it is important to note that although this paper has suggested some resources of autonomy, and a general satisfaction with their ability to meet their own aspirations about ‘the good life’. It is also important to remember that I met them on their ‘home turf’ not at a parent-teacher meeting, a meeting in the bank or in the municipality or else where, where I perhaps would observe symbolic violence. I did sense symbolic violence and domination in some of their stories about such diverse issues as the time in school, impressing women, their political support of the right wing nationalist Danish People’s Party, their passion for hunting as well as the structure of the wage system, which some of them have no chance to

<sup>31</sup> Despite having a dirty job, Anders, for instance, clearly articulated his dislike for social security recipients who, according to him, cannot keep a tight home (cf. Douglas 1966). What is more, “it’s not fair to the kids because they will grow up not knowing any better”, he explained to me.

figure out. These issues are described elsewhere (Kyed 2009:91-94).<sup>32</sup>



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### Abstract

This article discusses Pierre Bourdieu's perception of working-class autonomy in *Distinction*. It is argued that in this monumental work, Bourdieu is unclear about the issue of symbolic domination or the 'antinomy of domination' of the so-called 'dominated classes'. A small-scale ethnographic fieldwork among refuse collectors in a Danish city is applied to scrutinise the issue further. The empirical data suggest that normative dimensions of everyday life may be important bastions for class identity and class autonomy in contemporary Denmark – especially in the working classes. It is also suggested that Thomas Højrup's 'life-mode analysis' approach may solve some of the problems Bourdieu faces vis-à-vis explaining the empirically observed autonomy of this supposedly 'dominated class'.

### Keywords

Class, symbolic domination, autonomy, refuse collectors, life-mode analysis

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