

## Culture



**Béatrix LE WITA (J.A. UNDERWOOD, translator), *French Bourgeois Culture*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press and Paris: Éditions de la Maison des Sciences de l'Homme, 1994: 168 pages**

David S. Moyer

Volume 15, Number 2, 1995

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1083885ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1083885ar>

[See table of contents](#)

### Publisher(s)

Canadian Anthropology Society / Société Canadienne d'Anthropologie (CASCA), formerly/anciennement Canadian Ethnology Society / Société Canadienne d'Ethnologie

### ISSN

0229-009X (print)

2563-710X (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

### Cite this review

Moyer, D. (1995). Review of [Béatrix LE WITA (J.A. UNDERWOOD, translator), *French Bourgeois Culture*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press and Paris: Éditions de la Maison des Sciences de l'Homme, 1994: 168 pages]. *Culture*, 15(2), 131–133. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1083885ar>

Tous droits réservés © Canadian Anthropology Society / Société Canadienne d'Anthropologie (CASCA), formerly/anciennement Canadian Ethnology Society / Société Canadienne d'Ethnologie, 1995

This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

**érudit**

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

<https://www.erudit.org/en/>

missionary endeavours with theological, philosophical and anthropological insights. The text, buttressed by fifty missionary biographies (in the concluding appendix), is dense and demanding. But the reader's perseverance, once put to the test, will be amply rewarded. In the Way is, and will remain, a vital aid to anyone dedicated to trying to understand one of the great human phenomena – the missionary movement.

Béatrix LE WITA (J.A. UNDERWOOD, translator), *French Bourgeois Culture*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press and Paris: Éditions de la Maison des Sciences de l'Homme, 1994: 168 pages.

by David S. Moyer

University of Victoria

This book is a translation of *Ni Vue Ni Connue, Approche ethnographique de la culture bourgeoise*, which appeared in 1988 as Number 9 in the Collection Ethnologie de la France published by the Fondation de la Maison des Sciences de l'Homme. Usually a translation is either a convenience for the multilingual reader or essential for the unilingual reader. This work goes far beyond simple translation; the translator's notes provide essential material which enables the non-French reader to comprehend the original. Indeed, many of the ethnographic details are so culturally specific that the translation refers to equally culturally specific details of English culture, which may be unfamiliar to North American readers.

A single example gives a sense of the problem and, at the same time, reveals the subtlety and thoroughness of the original ethnography. The original states that an 18-year-old schoolgirl, in the process of commenting on a school photograph, used no less than nine categories of bourgeois, that is, "*pas très bourgeoise; bourgeoise sage; très bourgeoise; très bourgeoise-très BCBG; hyperminette-bourgeoise; petite bourgeoise; bourgeoise cru Sainte-Marie; superbourgeoise; aristo*" (p. 96). This is translated as "not very bourgeois, discrete bourgeois, very bourgeois, very bourgeois-very BCBG, hyper-trendy bourgeois, petit bourgeois, Sainte-Marie vintage bourgeois, super-bourgeois, toff [aristo]" (p. 85). Sainte-Marie is the name of the school and the reference is clear in context. The translator adds a footnote which explains BCBG (short for "*bon-chic-bon-genre*" and pronounced "bay-say-bay-zhay").

BCBG: In fact, and in terms of very complex standards, it refers to everything that distinguishes those who know from those who do not, the aristocracy and the ancient bourgeoisie from the rest, the new rich from the old rich (especially those who have now fallen on hard times which is of only relative importance since they are "BCBG"). From the Introduction to Thierry Hantoux, *Guide du BCBG*, Paris: Hermé, 1985 (p. 85).

In England "Sloane ranger" is approximately equivalent, while a Canadian colleague originally from Paris offered "pre-yuppie" as a North American English translation of BCBG. There is an important lesson to be learned here about the translation of indigenous ethnographic concepts into an international language that has distinct local cultural variants. Having spent a great deal of time in an earlier chapter on the problems of defining the bourgeoisie, the author wisely does not try to define the nine named categories.

In addition to demonstrating the kind of cultural elaboration that anthropologists find fascinating, the example indicates the elaborate private encoding that typifies much of continental bourgeois culture. In the Netherlands, for instance, one hears the expression "*OSM*" (pronounced "oh-es-em"), and more commonly "*niet OSM*" (not OSM). Having heard the expression used by a professor's wife, a Dutch colleague asked her what OSM meant. He was told that it meant "*Onze Soort Mensen*" (our kind of people). Half jokingly, he said that by asking what OSM meant, he had shown that he obviously was not OSM, and as a result his entire university education was wasted. The knowledge or lack of knowledge of these codes is serious business.

Between the private sphere and the public sphere the bourgeoisie erected a system of practices in which learning to recognize these distinguishing signs constituted an essential element. The bourgeois "culture" was acquired and handed down, as we shall see, in the bosom of the family and its educational appendages (p. 59).

Le Wita gives considerable attention to two coded systems that illustrate her point and allow the bourgeoisie to recognize and place each other. One is dress; the other is table manners. The dress section is well described and well illustrated with photographs that never reveal a recognizable bourgeois face. The caption of one photograph

sums up the general principles: "A bourgeois silhouette? A certain neutrality, subtle emblematic details, each one perceptible to the trained eye" (p. 9). For Le Witta the ring (*la bague*) was a key sign.

I ... saw almost the same ring over and over again, adorning dozens of different hands. Sometimes it was a sapphire, sometimes an emerald; always it was surrounded by diamonds and set in white gold and platinum. Often the stone was a gift from a member of the family and the setting the choice of a fiancé. But beyond the resultant variations of detail, what strikes the observer is the uniformity of this 'little thing' worn in all circumstances (p. 64).

Table manners are even more important and serve to distinguish between acceptable and unacceptable associates. A young woman "brought home a boyfriend of unknown provenance and her mother announced several days later that they could not have him again since he behaved badly at table" (p.70). The friend was "not one of us" (*hors milieu*). A subsequent boy "whom she had come across by chance in Holland, passed the 'table test' (*l'essai à table*) brilliantly. Lacking any fixed occupation he was nevertheless the son of a naval officer" (p. 71). Table manners are a particularly good window for viewing the three factors which La Wita feels "seem capable of accounting for this bourgeois culture: the art of detail, self-control or a controlled internalisation and the ritualisation of every day existence providing a passage from the private sphere to the public sphere" (p. 71). As she says, "mealtimes are consciously experienced as a special moment of socialisation around which the whole complex of the distinguishing marks of the bourgeois family group becomes focused and is handed down" (p. 73). However, having established the broad, even pan European, principles of the code, she notes that each family seeks to develop its own distinctness. "You have to know, for example, that great grandfather used to cut his salad with a knife" (p. 75). As in most elite European cultures, one must know the rules very well in order to break them in a charming rather than in a boorish manner.

In addition to the family, the schools which the elite attend are the other key formative institution. The author chose to study one girls' school. Curiously, the absence of any comparative material on a boys' school does not appear to be a serious shortcoming. Although the college known as Sainte-Marie de Neuilly would not allow the

ethnographer access to the institution, she was able to study the role of the institution in maintaining bourgeois culture through interviews with the former students. Though initially this strikes one as a serious limitation, in the end it is turned to advantage. The interviews reveal the lasting effects that the school had on its students and the relation these effects have to the preservation, maintenance and adaptation of bourgeois culture. This is particularly interesting in the chapter called "The Parable of the Talents"; the pun on the word "talents" works equally well in English and French. The Biblical parallel was mentioned often in interviews. The story refers to the rewarding of the servants who invested gold (talents) wisely and punishment of the servant who failed to use the gold and just hid it away. As she points out,

...according to official French Roman Catholic commentary, Jesus is taking issue with the religious leaders of the day. God's word has been entrusted to them, and they have hoarded it .... The man who has [received it] must grow and increase (the servant and his "talents" gold). .... the pupil who has [received] must increase and give; that is what "having the Sainte-Marie Spirit" means (p. 108).

This gives a theological foundation to the focus on the individual, and not just on family background, that forms the basis of the school's approach. It also helps to explain why some girls from the same family go to the school and others from the same nuclear family do not go there or are removed (expelled is too harsh a word). As she points out, "At the very least, the system may be said to be innocent of demagoguery. This is how it helps to inculcate the 'self control' and asceticism that characterise bourgeois culture" (p. 109). This focus on the formation of the individual is a key to understanding European bourgeois culture. It is in this regard that European bourgeois culture is quite different from English upper middle class culture. Although in England there is a greater awareness of class and belonging to a group, on the continent there is a sense of personal social honour that is far greater than that in the English middle class. Though the author does not make this point explicitly, the book serves as an important corrective to those who use English middle class culture as a referent for European middle class culture in general. There are important differences and the book is especially good at elucidating the distinctly European aspects of French bourgeois culture.

The penultimate and last substantive chapter ("The Three Generations") deals with kinship. "It takes three generations, we were told, to make a bourgeois, and in this respect all of our informants belong to a fully mature bourgeoisie" (p. 118). It is genealogical depth that contrasts the bourgeoisie and the nobility from other social classes. She notes that "all of the bourgeois informants mentioned the members making up the phratries [sic, fratries, i.e. sibling groups. According to Petit Larousse the term includes brother and sisters] of their four grandparents" (p. 123). This contrasts sharply with other districts in Paris and with Segalen's work on Brittany, where all but one patronymic of the grandparental generation has been forgotten. Le Wita notes that "for the population at large, not including the affluent classes, grandparents do appear to constitute the limit of people's genealogical knowledge" (p. 125). Further, there is a difference in sheer quantity. In a working class district of Paris, 50 per cent of the genealogies contained between 26 and 100 people while only 5.5 percent mentioned more than 100. In contrast, half the bourgeois informants mentioned 50 to 100 relatives and the rest between 150 and 300.

Two examples give a general feel for the author's ethnographic touch with regard to kinship.

In this chapter and elsewhere she describes the position of the *pièce rapportée*. The translator explains the term as follows: "borrowed in this instance from dress making, a *pièce rapportée* being a piece of contrasting material added to, say, a dress. The figurative sense evoked is something like 'new blood' " (p. 47). The term is used to refer to in-marrying women. The term is used by parents to refer to a daughter-in-law and by brothers to refer to a sister-in-law. Curiously, the author does not mention whether or not it is ever used by a woman to refer to her brother's wife. Elsewhere she attributes remarks as typical of a *pièce rapportée*:

We all have the same background. We were brought up by women. Some people attach more importance than others to this or that. In the education of children, there are some things that take first place. For instance, it infuriates me when I see my nephews nibble at fruit and leave it virtually untouched (p. 139).

The second example relates to the importance of matrification in a nominally patronymic system.

This typically works at the effective selective level where, as she notes, the "recollections tend to relate more to the maternal side of the family and to female elements in the kindred" (p. 137). She is careful to point out with a pair of examples that this type of genealogical recollection applies to both male and female informants.

In conclusion, though the book deals with the conceptual problems of the definition of the bourgeoisie, it is the ethnographic details of who and what the bourgeoisie are that excel. It is a contribution to the ethnography of the European elites and how they maintain themselves through the generations. The book is more than a simple translation. The translator has gone to considerable length to explain some of the very culturally specific notions. For people who read French well but are not particularly familiar with the details of French and continental elite culture, the book is a useful aid to the French original. To those interested in the details of a continental elite system, both the original and the translation are important. In attempting to verify the translation, I have found usages that are unknown to both French and Québécois colleagues. It is a very good book when the translation is read alone, and a particularly exciting and insightful ethnography when read in conjunction with the original.

Fabrizio SABELLI, *Recherche anthropologique et développement*, Neuchâtel: Éditions de l'Institut d'ethnologie et Paris : Éditions de la MASON des sciences de l'homme, 1993, 176 pages (broché).

Par Mike Singleton

CIDEP

Ancien missionnaire, mes supérieurs m'avaient fait faire, au milieu des années soixante, de l'anthropologie à Oxford, dans l'espoir que cela pouvait servir à mieux emballer l'envoi de l'essentiel de la Révélation biblique vers l'Afrique Noire. (Mal) heureusement, cela n'a servi qu'à ma démission. Car les païens que j'étais censé convertir ont toujours fini par me convaincre, souvent à leur insu et parfois à leur corps défendant, de la justesse de leurs propres philosophies et pratiques. Mais ça c'est une autre histoire! Ce qui me frappe, après coup, c'est la schizophrénie spéculative dont souffraient, à l'époque, tant feu mon maître, Sir Evans-Pritchard, que mon maître à penser Claude Lévi-Strauss. Tous les deux tenaient la dichotomie