

# From the Reading Public and Individual Readers Towards a Sociology of Reading Milieus

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*In spite of studies on the external history of reading and on individual readers we know very little about the reading habits of groups of readers. Bourdieu has provided a model for the correlation of class and taste but his model is rather crude compared with contemporary studies based on 'sinus milieus'. Jost Schneider reconstructs, for instance, the taste of the lower middle class which is characterized by stasis, of the liberal-technocrat milieu which is oriented toward the formal experiments of the 'classical' avant-garde and the hedonistic milieu which is searching for new styles and trends. Schneider's results still await corroboration by empirical data.*

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A history of literature that excludes readers deals only with the *offer* of communication but not with literary communication itself. If literary history is conceived as a parade of authors and texts it covers only virtual meanings and interpretations established by a synthesis of the readings of a handful of prominent critics. If the communication aspect is taken seriously, the impact of literature, the 'use' that readers make of books, is as important as textual analysis. Only if we take into account the readers' response we can hope to find answers to the questions about the role of literature in history, about the distribution of ideas, the formation of opinions and mentalities by literary texts, and about the construction of group identities. If the focus is directed at the consumption of literature the selection of works will be totally different from the canon constructed in conventional literary histories.

Reading research started with studies of the external history of reading. Book historians have compiled substantial quantitative data, which can be divided into two types, namely macro and micro evidence. (cf. Darnton,

'First Steps' 158). On the macro level, statistics based on national bibliographies (e.g., catalogues of the Leipzig book fair, the *Bibliographie de la France*, the papers of the *Stationers' company*) show the emergence of the modern book market and the corresponding reading public. Data on the degree of literacy, the number of book shops, book prices, print runs and sales provide a tentative image of the impact of literature and of the literary audience at a certain point of time. The history of press legislation and censorship contributes to the reconstruction of literary communication: it demonstrates the limits of the distribution of literature. Rudolf Schenda came to the conclusion that the vast majority of the lower and lower middle-classes remained illiterate and virtually excluded from literary communication until the 20th century. Reading was (and to a certain extent still is) the privilege of an educated minority.

On the micro level, the catalogues of private libraries of the nobility, of clergymen and other outstanding personalities provide insights into individuals' book holdings. Remarks in letters, diaries and other autobiographical sources yield often detailed information about individuals' reading practices. From the point of view of literary studies, and especially from a Comparative Literature perspective, authors' own reading habits, their literary education and knowledge, is of particular interest. Contemporary images of readers provide information about the mode of reading, e.g., about the development of reading from a social to a private experience, or the change from reading aloud to silent reading. In a similar vein, the representations of reading in the works of imaginative writers, mainly in novels, may be used as a source for reading manners and habits. From the 18<sup>th</sup> century on, the catalogues of reading clubs and circulating libraries add information about the favourite reading matter.

Other sources apt for the reconstruction of reading are the pedagogical writings of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries which condemn the extensive reading of novels (called 'Lesesucht' in German) and in particular of novels like *Werther* and *La nouvelle Héloïse*. Robert Darnton ('Readers') has analysed letters sent to Rousseau revealing the new modes of sentimental reading and identification with fictional characters. Autobiographical accounts such as memoirs and diaries sometimes provide data about the quality of reading and marginal notes in books may testify to the fact that reading often leads to immediate virtual dialogue. Recently, psychologist Norbert Groeben (cf. Christmann and Groeben) has proposed empirical studies of the psychology of the reading process by way of certain experiments and questionnaires. Currently at Vienna university, in a dissertation prepared by Maria Handler, this type of study is applied in order to 'test' the impression of English translations of Rilke's poems and the original German texts on a sample of readers.

To sum up, in early reading research the focus was on the outlines of the quantitative development of the reading public and microanalytical studies compiling data on individual readers. But we still know very little about the reading habits of certain groups of readers. In the late 18<sup>th</sup> century the reading public started to grow considerably and to differentiate into groups with tastes of their own. By then, a hierarchy of cultural goods, corresponding to social hierarchy, had to a large extent already emerged. Pierre Bourdieu in *La distinction* was the first to research systematically different life styles.<sup>1</sup> According to Bourdieu not only do social groups have a taste of their own but, more important still, art serves as a means of social distinction.

The taste for high brow art and literature (Bourdieu speaks of legitimate art) is *not* a natural gift; it presupposes education, cultural competence and of course enough spare-time for an adequate reception of a work of art. The understanding of legitimate art requires the knowledge of its 'code' and of its history, of the development of styles and techniques, since a single work makes only sense if it is set in relation to other works. By the way, the consumption of works of art, which are by definition 'useless' from a practical point of view, demonstrates that the consumer is free from economic necessity and can afford such a 'luxury' activity. Legitimate art is autonomous and independent from everyday life as well as from any particular purpose. It is considered a pure form and requires a 'pure' gaze from the reader as well as distance and disinterestedness, e.g., distance from the characters in a novel and disinterestedness in features like a happy ending, suspense, amusement and the like.

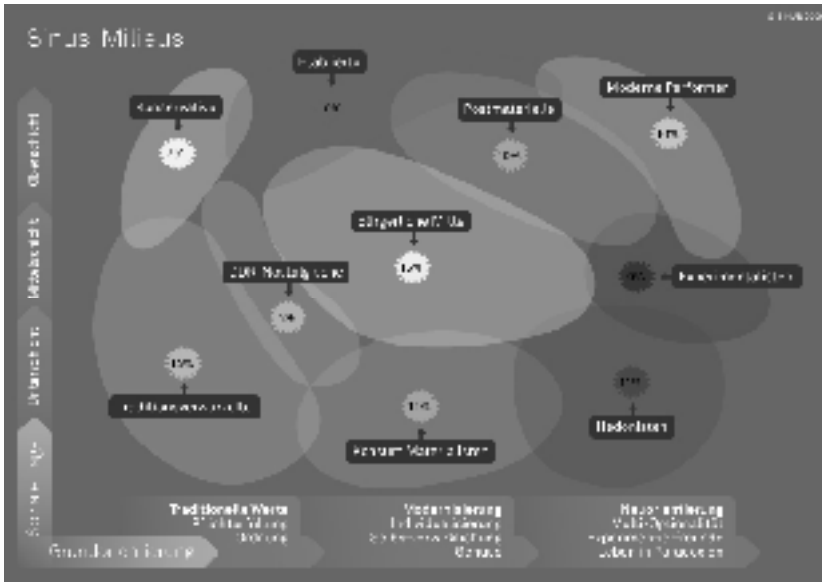
On the other hand, popular art and taste do not lay claim to any independent aesthetic value. Whereas legitimate art implies a sort of agnostic attitude, popular art is heteronomous, and more likely to present ethical or political issues. Works of art are regarded as useful and scarcely distinguished from objects of everyday life. Whereas legitimate art provides no 'natural' pleasures and requires a refusal of everything 'human' (which is by definition common and vulgar), popular art relies on the stimulation of the senses and invites the recipient to participate in the game, e.g., in a drama or a novel.

Bourdieu distinguishes between three zones of taste:

- le gout légitime (legitimate taste), i.e., the taste for legitimate works;
- le gout 'moyen' (middle brow taste), which comprises the minor works of the major arts; and
- le gout 'populaire' (popular taste) (*Distinction* 14–16).

Bourdieu's model of the relation between class and taste is very convincing but the method of classification is still rather crude. A recent study

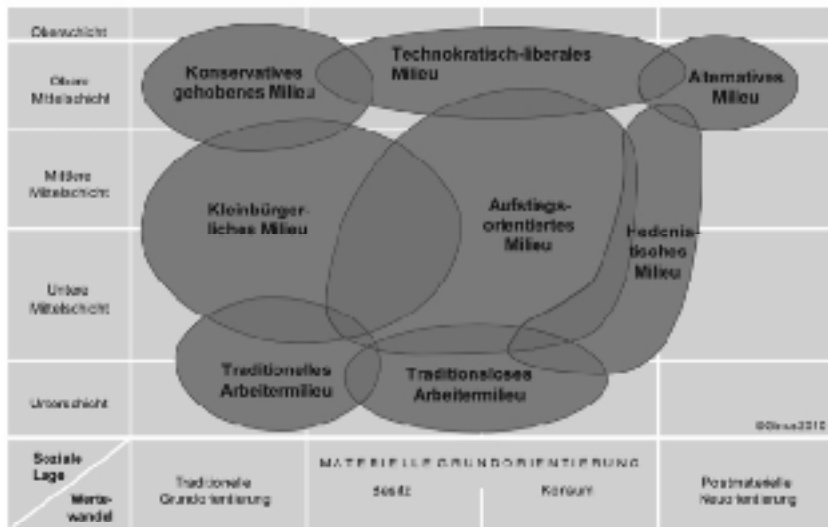
by Jost Schneider entitled *Social History of Reading* uses the ten ‘*sinus milieus*’ instead of the system of three classes. Society has become more complex and diverse than it was 35 years ago when Bourdieu started his research. Today all classes have at least theoretically access to cultural production, including literature. The concept of class should therefore be replaced by the more flexible concept of milieu which provides a much more subtle system of categorisation. The system of ‘*sinus milieus*’, originally developed for marketing research, seems an appropriate means of distinguishing between consumer groups. The idea of the *sinus milieus* is based on the correlation of two parameters: on the one hand, social position (which divides upper, middle and lower classes and which was the main parameter for the distinction between social *classes*), on the other hand, value orientation on a spectrum spanning conservative and progressive views.



Source: [http://www.google.at/images?hl=de&biw=1020&bih=614&rlz=1R2GGLL\\_de&q=sinus+milieus+2009&revid=1890806054&um=1&ie=UTF-8&source=univ&ei=hd8oTefeNYS18QO\\_sbSFAw&sa=X&oi=image\\_result\\_group&ct=title&resnum=3&ved=0CDQQAQwAg](http://www.google.at/images?hl=de&biw=1020&bih=614&rlz=1R2GGLL_de&q=sinus+milieus+2009&revid=1890806054&um=1&ie=UTF-8&source=univ&ei=hd8oTefeNYS18QO_sbSFAw&sa=X&oi=image_result_group&ct=title&resnum=3&ved=0CDQQAQwAg)

The system of ‘*sinus milieus*’ appears in different variations. In the version used by Schneider the region between the group of the well-established (*Etablierte*) and the post-materialists (*Postmaterielle*) is called liberal-technocrat milieu (*Technokratisch-liberales Milieu*), the bourgeois middle class is labelled as a class that is heading towards social advancement (*anstiegsorientiertes Milieu*), the modern performers (*moderne Performer*) are called alternative milieu (*alternatives Milieu*).

## Die Milieulandschaft der 80er Jahre



Source: [http://www.google.at/images?hl=de&biw=1020&bih=614&rlz=1R2GGLL\\_de&q=inus+milieus+2009&revid=1890806054&um=1&ie=UTF-8&source=univ&ei=hd8oTefeNYS18QO\\_sbSFAw&sa=X&oi=image\\_result\\_group&ct=title&resnum=3&ved=0CDQQAQwAg](http://www.google.at/images?hl=de&biw=1020&bih=614&rlz=1R2GGLL_de&q=inus+milieus+2009&revid=1890806054&um=1&ie=UTF-8&source=univ&ei=hd8oTefeNYS18QO_sbSFAw&sa=X&oi=image_result_group&ct=title&resnum=3&ved=0CDQQAQwAg)

In what follows, we shall take a closer look at the reading habits of three milieus.

1) The members of the traditional milieus comprise the lower middle class; their overall goal is to maintain their relatively modest standard of living, since any change of the status quo is liable to lead to social decline. Law and order, moral standards, positive thinking, a traditional codex of behaviour and homeliness (*Gemütlichkeit*) are important in this milieu. The lower middle class prefer popular authors like Heinz Konsalik, Johannes Mario Simmel and Utta Danella (who represent the ‘lower middle class’ also in terms of literary value; it is significant that their books are distributed mainly in supermarkets and book-clubs, not in regular book shops). It is perhaps worth mentioning *en passant* that Konsalik and Simmel have been translated into dozens of languages and that their success is almost worldwide. We have already stated that popular art is more likely to present moral issues. Thus, in his adventurous and romantic plots Simmel regularly introduces contemporary social problems and plays the role of a friend of the common people who defends civil rights. On the other hand, Danella is a favourite of traditional female milieus; it goes without saying that her model of partnership of the sexes approves marriage and family-life. Her critique of ‘the rich’ and their lack of morals coincides perfectly with lower

middle-class attitudes and values. The same applies to the use of dialect and stereotypical motifs, sentiments and wording (Kitsch) in the lyrics of modern popular songs, most of them related to a pseudo-rural setting. In popular comedy the class opponents, the members of the 'uncivilized' working class and the rich and intellectual elite, are exposed to ridicule.

2) The liberal-technocrat milieu is composed of two groups, the former *Bildungsbürgertum* (i.e., the intellectuals, comprising e.g., lawyers, medical doctors and architects) and the leading circles in politics and economy (the 'experts' and 'managers'). The members of this milieu hold the most responsible positions in various sectors of society; in their opinion art should not only be a formalist play without purpose, they appreciate an earnestness of approach, e.g., the moral commitment of authors like Thomas Bernhard or Elfriede Jelinek. It is quite clear that the understanding of this kind of literature requires a solid education in history, philosophy and many other disciplines, a private library that enables the reader to check names and allusions of any sort, and the ability and the will to concentrate on a text for a certain time-span.

Furthermore, this milieu prefers world literature, including avant-garde works employing formal experiments. Liberal technocrats approve of the individual point of view produced by narrative techniques like inner monologue and stream-of-consciousness. Through the use of unusual words and syntax, modern poetry often comes close to very private language and expression. Finally, self-irony is a technique for expressing the relativism of values which is the central dogma in the liberal milieu.

3) Non-conformism and sympathy for the avant-garde are the hallmarks of the hedonistic milieu. It comprises mainly young people who are not yet established and have abundant leisure time. What counts most and provides the highest prestige among hedonists is the discovery of still unknown works and styles that are liable to set a trend. It is no surprise that marketing research is very interested in the taste and habits of this milieu. Innovations produced here are often copied and adopted in the cultural mainstream. Hedonists do not accept the boundary between high and popular literature. In art and literature – as in life – they appreciate strong stimuli and instant pleasure. On the whole, (pop-)music plays a more important role than reading for them. A literary genre that suits this milieu well is so-called pop literature (represented, among others, by Benjamin Stuckrad-Barre), it discusses the problems of young people in a highly self-indulgent but also self-ironic tone. Slamming poetry is a format that combines easy-to-consume text and musical rhythm. The relation of this milieu to consumer society is ambivalent, hedonists waver between consumerism and critical distance.

## Conclusion

Schneider's book deserves respect as a first attempt at a sociological history of reading but his approach requires a critical review.

1) The classification of readers he employs is sometimes quite convincing and even self-evident, but sometimes very problematic. For instance, the inclusion of technocrats and intellectuals in one milieu neglects the traditional tensions between commercial and intellectual bourgeoisie, between economic and cultural/symbolic capital (Besitz- and Bildungsbürgertum). According to Bourdieu's analysis, economic and cultural capital tend to exclude each other, their relation is complementary and chiasmic, i.e., 'les fractions les plus riches en capital économique relèguent les investissements culturels et éducatifs au profit des investissements économiques' (*Distinction* 133). In other words, those who have already accumulated a certain amount of economic capital lose interest in accumulating cultural capital. The reason for this is the social hierarchy within the upper classes: those rich in economic capital prevail over the intellectuals.

2) Schneider's indications of reading habits represent only a tendency, they are 'typical' of a certain milieu, describe cultural choices and preferences that are statistically over-represented. The correlations between readers of a certain milieu and individual books are only assumptions about the identity of the values inherent in texts and the values ascribed to a certain milieu. Future sociological reader research should try to establish empirical data on reading habits and tastes. Interviews or question-forms are the most exact instruments for measuring taste but they require funding and a research team. As an alternative, the data from sources used for historical reader research – records of individuals, catalogues of private libraries, indications about reading in autobiographical texts and letters – must be accumulated with respect to social groups and milieus. Finally, the readers' choice in public libraries must be screened, even if the protection of privacy may sometimes render this type of research difficult.<sup>2</sup>

3) But, in spite of such problems, Schneider's history of *reading* may serve as a model for a future history of *literature* structured not by literary genres but by classes of readers and their interests. In fact it seems necessary that the history of reading be combined with a history of the texts. The sociology of literary production and literary styles should be linked with readers' expectations and different functions and 'uses' of literary texts by different milieus of readers. If we succeed in developing the history of *reading* along the lines sketched above, it may one day become a history of literary *communication*, that is, a history of the production, distribution and reception of literature.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> An important forerunner was Levin L. Schücking who in his *Soziologie der literarischen Geschmacksbildung* had underlined the necessity to differentiate the reading public in various milieus and regarded the *form* of a work of art as a means of social distinction.

<sup>2</sup> The Department of Comparative literature at Vienna University holds the papers of Vienna's last private circulating library, the Leihbibliothek Last & Co. which was closed in 1962; cf. the study of Bachleitner (1986) based on the lists of books taken out by individual readers.

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