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Bourdieu's Demon: Strategies of the Upper Middle Class in the Information Age

Richard Baker

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The authors present extensive primary research regarding an irreversible process occuring within the upper middle class. The income and discretionary expenditures of 1500 affluent people, and their related motives, are analyzed in a series of steps. First is the identification of statistically different "styles of living" based on differences in motives. This analysis confirms Weber's hypothesis. Second is the identification of differences in the rate, risk level and content of information acquired through the discretionary expenditures. A clear relationship between three different information strategies and three different levels of economic performance over several decades emerges. The analogy between Bourdieu's habitus and Maxwell's demon is used to convey the premise that variances in information-seeking behavior have the same impact in the socio-economic space as differences in energy have in physical space. The upper middle class divides into three different structures with divergent trajectories relevant to economic equilibrium. The structure (and process) which is most oriented to acquiring and applying a mix of functional and symbolic information is consistently the most highly rewarded over time (i.e., earned income) by the environment. The multi-faceted analysis of this unified set of data provides confirmation of theories in economics (e.g., Kahneman), sociology (e.g., Bourdieu), evolution (e.g., Deacon, Dennett, Kauffman) and psychology (e.g., Cooley, Goffman, Rose, Kolb). Anyone interested in the "consilience" of art and science, and the demonstration of "near chaos" phenomena in society, should consider the information in this study. The collaboration of the authors, one a mathematician and the other a liberal arts major, is a reflection of the theme (as is the title, which links a socioligist and a physicist). In addition to the basic findings the study provides clear and practical considerations for individuals seeking to stay relevant and compete in an world of accelerating change. The implications for executives, degreed professionals and the self-employed are demonstrated in the longitudinal analysis of information strategy and income by occupation.

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