

DISTINCTION IN SÃO PAULO

Research Seminar, November 25-26, 2025, Universidade Estadual de Campinas, Brazil

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On November 25–26, the [Centro de Sociologia Contemporânea](#) held the seminar “[Seminário Final da Pesquisa Para Além D’A Distinção](#)” at Universidade Estadual de Campinas (UNICAMP), Brazil. The event marked the conclusion of the research project *Distinction in São Paulo*¹. It was the latest in a series of events organized at the end of 2025: at École Normale Supérieure (ENS) Paris-Saclay (15–16 October), London School of Economics (LSE) (28 October), and Universidade de São Paulo (USP) (12 November). Coordinated by Renato Ortiz, the project brings together an international team of scholars from Brazil, France, England, Portugal, and Norway.

At UNICAMP, the Brazilian research team presented the project’s main findings. To our knowledge, this is the

first study in South America to adopt a comprehensive Bourdieusian framework, particularly inspired by *La Distinction*, to construct both symbolic and social spaces and assess their possible homologies. Conducted in the city of São Paulo amid recent social transformations in Brazil, the project examines the social determinants of cultural tastes and practices and evaluates whether cultural capital shapes class dynamics and stratification. More broadly, it investigates whether and how cultural capital is converted into symbolic power within contemporary stratification processes.

The research follows a mixed-methods design in which each phase informs the next: document analysis and focus groups → survey → in-depth interviews (see [here](#)). These stages were preceded by the construction of a spatial typology of São Paulo. Based on socio-demographic indicators, we identified clusters of districts. This typology guided both the survey sampling strategy and the selection of areas for closer observation.

Document analysis and focus groups functioned as exploratory tools. The document analysis mapped cultural and lifestyle offerings to inform both the focus groups and the survey. The six focus groups – comprising participants

¹ This project was funded by the [Fundação de Amparo à Pesquisa do Estado de São Paulo](#) (FAPESP).

from different class positions – were especially important in preventing us from “imposing the problematic.” By observing discussions about leisure, tastes, distastes and aversions, and cultural hierarchies, we generated hypotheses and questions for the questionnaire (see our use of focus groups in Mira, Castro and Michetti (2024) and Bertencelo and Nicolau Netto (2023)).

The survey was conducted through household interviews between June and October 2024, based on a representative sample of 2,004 adult residents (18+) of São Paulo. Respondents answered more than 900 questions designed to construct both symbolic and social spaces. We also included items to map geographic location and mobility, enabling the construction of a geographic space. To build the symbolic space, we designed questions across 14 domains (from the arts to food and travel) in order to map lifestyles. The questionnaire ([here](#)) captured knowledge, practice, aspiration, taste, and distaste. For the social space, we collected extensive data on cultural and economic capital (both current possession and trajectories of acquisition/inheritance), along with sociodemographic variables (Nicolau Netto, Michetti, Bertencello, 2024). To deepen the analysis, we added two booster samples in 2025 (100 respondents each): one targeting high-income individuals from privileged

districts, the other educated young people from lower-class backgrounds from poorer districts, according to our aforementioned spatial typology.

After constructing the symbolic space through Multiple Correspondence Analysis – following procedures similar to those used by Bourdieu – we identified five clusters of tastes and practices. We then selected five individuals from each cluster (25 in total) for in-depth interviews. In addition to conducting the interviews, we examined their neighborhoods and carried out field observations in these areas. The interviews allowed us to analyze how individuals subjectively hierarchized culture, justified their tastes and distastes, and drew symbolic and social boundaries.

Some of the principal findings were presented at the seminar and are currently being prepared for publication. Among them, we concurred with the thesis suggesting a homology between the social and symbolic spaces of São Paulo, although we noted its limits, as the homology is stronger among the highest and lowest social classes. We also showed how elite distinction is produced through highly selective practices and tastes that abhor commercial popular culture and adhere to popular urban and legitimized cultures.

References

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