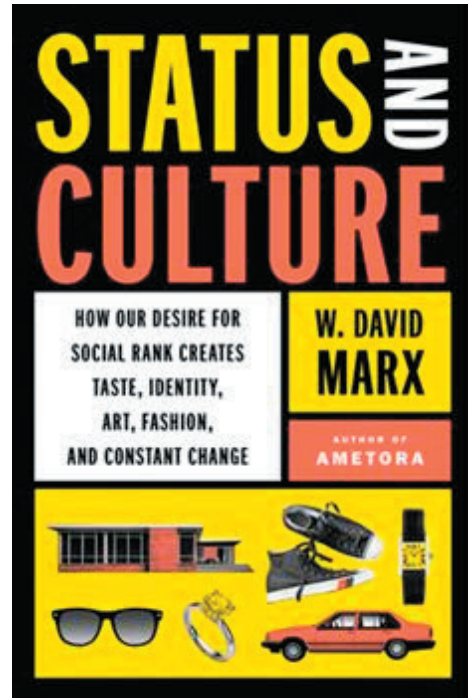


Status and Culture by W. David Marx
Viking, 2022. 273 pages plus notes.
\$27.49.

Review by Ed Meek

In a column for the New York Times, Michelle Goldberg wrote about a recent book she read that changed her perspective. That was enough of a nudge for me to get a hold of a copy of *Status and Culture*. In it, W. David Marx elucidates a theory that begins to show up everywhere once you are on to it. Do I read and refer to the New York Times to increase my status? What kind of car do you drive? Is it a BMW signaling that you can afford German engineering? Is it a Tesla, trumpeting that you have joined the fight against climate change? Is it a Ford F150 telling us you are a regular guy or gal? Do you buy designer clothes? Women, what type of bag do you carry? What kind of shoes do you wear? Guys, do you wear team jerseys and tee shirts? Parents, do you sport those college sweatshirts based on the college you went to or the one attended by your kid? Is it an ivy league college? What signals are you giving to others through your purchases? As W. David Marx says, "The lessons of this book lend credence to the Marxist idea of hegemony ... 'the shaping of the society's culture in the image of the dominant class.'"



W. David Marx is a writer on culture and the author of *Ametora: How Japan saved American Style*. In his new book, he makes the argument that it is the elite who influence everyone else to make decisions we mistakenly think are based on our own sense of taste. In *The Devil Wears Prada*, there's a great scene where Meryl Street explains to novice Anne Hathaway that "you're wearing a cerulean blue sweater selected for you by the people in this room (the fashion industry) based on a design by Oscar de la Renta." Many of us bought skinny jeans a few years ago and now hesitate to pull them on because they are no longer in style. I read in the New York Times that boomers should no longer be wearing my favorite jean jacket. Oh no!

The big idea is that "status structures provide the underlying conventions for each culture, which determine our behaviors, values, and perception of reality." Status, according to W. David Marx goes way beyond what we buy and what college our children attend. Consider your work environment. Who sits where and has access to what? What floor are you on? What kind of chair do you sit in? Where do you get to eat? Do you have a parking space? In meetings, who makes the decisions and why? Who gets taken seriously? Have you ever had the experience of expressing an idea that was ignored and later, the same idea is promoted by a higher up and adopted as his or her idea?

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Where this focus on status begins to get uncomfortable is when you apply it to your own behavior. Are we all still obsessed with what others think of us the way we were in middle school? I play senior softball where status is based on ability. The best hitters and fielders have the highest status. If I happen to have a good day at the plate, I appreciate it if it is acknowledged by my teammates and feel let down when it isn't. In professional sports status is quantified with numbers. Aaron Judge has recently vaulted over Roger Marris by breaking his Yankees home run record. Judge also has high status because he does not use steroids.

Media operates as a feedback loop where actors and artists and advertisements show us how we should dress, what we should believe, and what is valued. Music videos are all about status based on talent and conspicuous consumption. Beyonce and Jay Z demonstrate their status by filming a video in the Louvre. How rich they are!

According to W. David Marx, those of us in the middle class acquire our taste from sources like the New York Times, NPR, and The New Yorker. We learn from experts what to cook, what to read, what to watch, and how to think about politics.

Of course, a large part of the country has reacted against the influence of the elites and has their own status markers, from trucks to flags to MAGA wear. They watch Yellowstone, a show about a rich libertarian cowboy. Elites watch Succession, a show about a rich, selfish family, or Masterpiece Theater, dramas about the aristocracy.

To use another Marxist term, capitalism is overdetermined in the United States. Wealth has status and there is an overconcentration of it at the top leaving much of the country to struggle financially. That disparity really comes into focus when inflation occurs. The triumvirate of status, money and power makes it very difficult to change this class structure. W. David Marx doesn't really have answers for this. He promotes art as a means of breaking down status although art too is controlled by the elites. Surprisingly, he doesn't go to his namesake for the solution. That would be some form of socialism that ensures a more equal distribution of wealth through a graduated income tax or what Ezra Klein calls a consumption tax. We would be a better country if we awarded more status to manual laborers and teachers and social workers and less to celebrities and athletes and CEOs.

It is also true that like other theories of everything—Marxism, Freudian theory, Unified theory, not everything fits. Enjoying the fall in New England or the sunset, or hanging out with friends is not necessarily about status. Still, Status and Culture will have you rethinking what went on at your high school reunion, not to mention your Thanksgiving dinner.