

A SHIFT IN CULTURAL TASTE IN CONTEMPORARY CONSUMER SOCIETY: FROM SNOBBISHNESS TO OMNIVOROUSNESS. END OF CULTURAL BOUNDARIES?

As people consume, they also (re)make the world.
(Latimer, 2001, 162)

Ours is a consumer society ...
(Bauman, 1999, 36)

INTRODUCTION

This article explores the problem of consumption in postmodern reality. It focuses on the significance of consumption as an important concern of the social sciences and synthesizes a variety of sociological approaches in order to understand the nature of modern consumer society. The role and significance of culture is emphasized here. It is suggested that contemporary “omnivorous” consumption destabilizes the boundaries of social class, status and culture. Is it for certain? The author of this paper opens a discussion.

Pierre Bourdieu introduces his theory of social class distinction in 1979 in his work: *La Distinction*. The book was translated into English in 1984 and quickly became known worldwide and stimulated an important discussion in the field of social sciences. According to Bourdieu “differences in cultural capital mark the differences between the classes” (Bourdieu, 1984, 69). Society incorporates *symbolic goods* which are a weapon in strategies of (class) distinction and make visible, people’s preferences in the ordinary choices of everyday existence (Bourdieu, 1984, 66). What determines consumer choices is taste, which can be simply defined as a set of preferences for different cultural objects. Social classes shape consumption and cultural practices (e.g. fashion, food, past times). The phenomenon of consumption itself is a very broad and complex field of studies which should be recognized and analyzed as a separate social phenomenon (Bruce & Yearley, 2006, 48). Everyday

individuals use consumption to shape their lives and identities. Consumer culture is something that all people are involved in nowadays. According to Zygmunt Bauman, “we are today consumers in a consumers’ society. Consumer society is market society; we are all in and on the market, simultaneously customers and commodities” (Bauman, 2004, 91). People experience postmodern global reality every day and consumer goods are a meaningful part of their life and crucial to the personal identities in their meanings. This reality is often called a *global one*. Globalization has become the buzzword of our time — a term that describes a variety of changing economic, political, cultural, ideological, and environmental processes that are alleged to have accelerated and intensified within the last few decades (Steger, 2003, Preface). In contrast to all the other flows, globalization consists of multi-directional flows, with not a single point of geographic origin (Ritzer, 2010, 82).

Today, when globalization is a fact and social reality has changed, it is worth asking if Bourdieu’s theory is still as accurate as at its publication and what has changed in developed societies during two decades?

DEFINING GLOBALIZATION WITHIN THE CULTURAL ISSUES

Globalization means that no one can ‘opt out’ of the transformations brought about by modernity (Giddens, 1991, 22). Modernity is the period following the mid-eighteenth-century European Enlightenment which is characterized by the combination of secularization, rationalization, democratization, individualism, and the rise of scientific thinking. Giddens remarks that the main dimensions of modernity are industrialism and capitalism. According to him, the three dominant sources of the dynamism of modern changes were the separation of time and space, the development of disembedding mechanisms, and the reflexive appropriation of knowledge (Giddens, 1990, 53). The main idea of globalization theory is that any global change impacts every part of one’s life. This process applies to economic relations, government structures and popular culture. According to Steger’s definition (Steger, 2010, 14), globalization is a creation of new and multiplication of existing social networks and activities that increasingly overcomes traditional political, economic, cultural and geographical boundaries. Therefore, it can thus be defined as the intensification of worldwide relations which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa (Giddens, 1991). The main trends associated with globalization are neoliberal capitalism, liberaliza-

tion of trade and capital markets, technological developments, the rise of multi-national corporations, the global media, and migration. Ritzer (2010, 2) defines globalization as ‘transplanetary processes involving increasing liquidity and growing multidirectional flows as well as the structures they encounter and create’. Liquidity seems to be one of the most important characteristics of globalization. The concept of liquidity describes the increasing ease of movements, including the mobility of people, goods, information, and places in the global age. Liquid phenomena and ideas described by Zygmunt Bauman (2000) are highly relevant to the current perspective on globalization. Liquid phenomena concern foreign trade, investments, the internet, global financial transactions and interactions, and many other aspects of a modern life. According to Bauman, globalization is “a radical and irreversible change” (Bauman, 2004, 5). He perceives globalization as a “great transformation” that has affected state structures, working conditions, interstate relations, collective subjectivity, cultural production, daily life and relations between the self and the other (Bauman 2004, 5). Also Eriksen’s short definition points out that globalization simply involves all the contemporary processes that make distance irrelevant (Eriksen, 2007, 16). He specifies 3 main factors that had the biggest significance for global changes: the end of the Cold War (leading to tighter global integration), the development of the internet, and the development of identity politics (Eriksen, 2007, 3-4).

Another significant definition of globalization was introduced by Frederick Jameson (quoted in: Steger, 2010, 15) who says that “the whole concept of globalization reflects the sense of an immense enlargement of the world’s communication, as well as of the horizon of a world market, both of which seem far more tangible and immediate than at earlier stages of modernity”. Globalization refers to a multidimensional set of social processes that create, multiply, stretch, and intensify worldwide social independencies and exchanges while, at the same time fostering in people a growing awareness of deepening connections between the local and the distant (Steger, 2003, 13). According to the above, globalization is not a single process but a set of processes that operate simultaneously and unevenly on several levels and in various dimensions which breaks into the economic, political, cultural, and ideological dimensions (Steger, 2003, 36).

Nowadays, globalization has a great significance for various social sciences such as sociology, psychology and anthropology. According to Ritzer (2003, 506) “the defining characteristic of the anthropological approach towards globalization is its focus on cul-

ture”. Anthropologists used to see culture as tied to a particular place or territory. In the global age, many have come to recognize that culture has drifted away from its local form. According to Ritzer (2003, 506) it has been deterritorialized. Currently, most anthropologists recognize that deterritorialized culture tends to be reinserted, often to many different places, in many cases culture has generally become less stable than it had been in the past (Ritzer, 2003, 506). Anthropologists are still able to return to the traditional concern with place-based culture, albeit with a sense of how that culture is involved in, and affected by, global processes (Ritzer, 2003, 506). Therefore, social sciences, including anthropology, and their research methods are being radically altered because of the fluid nature of the increasingly globalized world. Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood (quoted in: Lee and Munro, 2001, 118) point that “any choice between goods is the result of, and contributes to, culture”. Then, consumption can be considered as a cultural praxis or culture can be considered as an act of consumption.

Culture as a symbolic construction, articulation, and dissemination of meaning (Steger, 2003, 82) is particularly affected by changes related to global transformations. Culture exists in the form of ideas, words, images, and musical sounds, which enables it to flow comparatively easily throughout the world. Nowadays (in the *global age*), that flow is increasingly easy because culture exists in non-material digitized forms. The internet permits global downloading and sharing of digitized cultural forms such as movies, videos, music, books, newspapers and photos (Ritzer, 2003, 244).

Globalization is a fact and consumerism is one of its aspects. A culture of consumers and consumerist models has been achieving a domination in many aspects of social life.

CONSUMERISM AND THE MEANING OF CONSUMPTION WITHIN CONTEMPORARY SOCIAL LIFE AND ITS SIGNIFICANCE IN THE WORLD IN THE GLOBAL AGE

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, consumption ‘is the act of buying and using products and services’. In the light of the above definition, consumption can be conceived as each act of money-spending and a consumer society is a society where consumption becomes a mass phenomenon and is not the domain of the upper classes only. Consumer society is based on a continual increase in consumer’s spending. That increase is fundamental for economic stability and growth of all developed countries (Schor,

1999). Nowadays, consumption is much more than an economic phenomenon — it is linked to culture, social relationships, and each individual self.

Consumption has become a very important part of everyday life and an area of concern for the social sciences. Because it influences people's experiences, identities, attitudes and lives, sociologists, psychologists, and anthropologists very carefully observe how, what, and when people consume. All members of a contemporary consumer society consume and it makes them an object of sociological concern. Social studies tend to use a term *consumerism* which is broader and more complex than *consumption*. While consumption is an act, consumerism is a way of life (Miles, 1998, 4). Market, currency exchange, and services have taken over other spheres of human life. Rules which were once valid only in world trade have started to penetrate other areas of our social and personal life. This process is known as supermarketization; people behave in the same way as they do in supermarkets: they pick and choose, calculate and test. That offers new possibilities to create a narrative self. Moreover, people communicate with others through consumer goods and they build up their identities using these goods. Late modernity opens up, not only freedom, but also the obligation to choose. It is a form of regulation that a modern society is a consumer culture and consumerism implies a 'free' market. As consumer goods and services play an active and significant role in our experiences in our social life, contemporary sociology has to concern itself with both the relationships between people, and the relationships between people and consumer goods and services.

According to the Dictionary of Sociology (Bruce & Yearley, 2006, 48), the term "consumer culture" refers to the idea where by wealthy capitalist societies, in the 1970s, became much more focused on consumption than production. Consumer culture relates both to the interest that citizens have in the consumption aspects of their life and to the industries that have developed to cater for societies' taste (Bruce & Yearley, 2006, 48). Therefore, there is a relationship between consumption and culture and the relationship is a bilateral one.

Although, the contemporary world is often called "a global village", there are a lot of differences among different countries and groups. Modern societies are distinctive especially in their perception of consumption policy. Firstly, the inhabitants of Western countries have, in general, had more money to spend on consumer goods, holidays and leisure. Secondly, since the beginning of this century, patterns of working hours within develop-

ing industrial countries have been given a structure which has led to people having more time for leisure. Next, the occupation of a person is no longer a guideline to who the person is. People create their own identities based on the way they spend their free time. Moreover, because of the aestheticization of everyday life, there is more interest and pressure on creating a high-standard lifestyle and individual image. Both of those involve the purchase of large numbers of products. People also use “positional goods” to demonstrate their membership of particular social groups and to distinguish themselves from others. While earlier in the nineteenth and twentieth century, social class, race and gender were the major sources of social division, in the late twentieth century, those have been replaced by patterns of consumptions (known as *consumption cleavages*). Finally, the market is extending into all areas of life and shopping itself has become a daily leisure activity (Abercrombie et. al., 1994, 83-84). Therefore, new quality social classes have risen, but it is important to emphasize that social divisions are created by the way in which material goods and services (e.g. housing, health, education) are consumed in advanced capitalist societies mainly.

(UNDERSTANDING) THE NATURE OF MODERN CONSUMER SOCIETY: DIFFERENT SOCIOLOGICAL APPROACHES

Social class shapes consumption and cultural practices, e.g. fashion, food or furniture. Also, particular occupational groups define themselves by particular types of culture. Specific social class shapes the consumption and the class position implying a culture zone. Max Weber observed that status groups are stratified according to the principles of their consumption of goods (Marshall, 1994, 86-87). Basing on Weber, other authors have started to develop their theories of social status and consumption. The most significant are Thorstein Veblen’s Theory of Conspicuous Consumption, Georg Simmel’s Concept of Fashion and, a theory already mentioned, Pierre Bourdieu’s Theory of Class Distinction.

Thorstein Veblen’s Theory of Conspicuous Consumption

Approaches to consumption have changed during the centuries and those in the past differ from nowadays. A theory which laid a foundation for further studies was Thorstein Veblen’s concept of Conspicuous Consumption describing the lavish spending on consumer goods and services, mainly for the purpose of displaying income, wealth and social

status (Dwyer, 2009). Veblen in his work which was published in 1899 says that “consumption of goods as an evidence of pecuniary strength had begun to work out in a more or less elaborate system” (Veblen, 1994, 68). Veblen also states that *conspicuous consumption* replaced *conspicuous leisure*.

Veblen says: “since the consumption of these more excellent goods is an evidence of wealth, it becomes honorific; and conversely, the failure to consume in due quantity and quality becomes a mark of inferiority and demerit” (Veblen 1994, 74). Louis Patsouras (2004, 54) concludes that conspicuous consumption (related to conspicuous leisure) is just a wasteful consumption of commodities which constitutes a “reputability”. It is worth mentioning another concept of this author — Veblen’s paradox describing how an increase in a particular product price, might cause an increase in demand for this product. The demand starts to decrease when the product is popular and common. Then possessing this product does not make the owner any different from the others. Therefore, the product itself loses its value and becomes an attribute of the lowest classes. Although, Veblen’s contribution to the contemporary understanding of consumer culture is incontestable, his theories are also incoherent in some points and accordingly open to critique.

Georg Simmel’s Concept of Fashion

Another important concept was Georg Simmel’s Concept of Fashion and the *Trickle-Down Effect*. Fashion is in a relationship with social class. People in the same class possess the same fashion and style. Fashion provides some attributes to show one’s adherence to a particular group, but these attributes quickly trickledown to lower classes and higher classes seek new forms of distinction (*the fashion cycle*). The author claims that fashion allows us both to conform with others and distinguish ourselves from others. He explains that people try to be different and unique not because they are trying to be different people but they are trying to become a new group by relabeling themselves. Meaningful historical moments and ascendant trends in sociology, philosophy, and politics, like Neo-Marxism or the Durkheimian/Liberal perspective, influenced contemporary thinking about consumption and consumerism.

Pierre Bourdieu’s Theory of Class Distinction

How one chooses to present one’s social space to the world (one’s aesthetic disposition) depicts a status and distances oneself from other social groups. Pierre Bourdieu (1984) hypothesizes that these dispositions are internalized at an early age.

Particular class fractions are determined by a combination of varying degrees of social, economic, and cultural capital. They develop their own aesthetic criteria and have own artists, philosophers, newspapers, etc. Each fraction teaches specific aesthetic preferences to their young. According to Bourdieu, people acquire more or less cultural capital from their social background which includes family background, education, previous experiences or the ability to appreciate cultural objects. Bourdieu says “the different fractions of the dominant class distinguish themselves precisely through that which makes them members of the class as a whole, namely the type of capital which is the source of their privilege and the different manners of asserting their distinction which are linked to it” (Bourdieu, 1984, 258).

A Consumer — an Actor or a Puppet?

There are different approaches to consumer’s position in contemporary capitalist culture and there are two mainstream views, treating the problem of consumption as a positive or a negative. The first approach appreciates the phenomenon of consumerism and the processes connected to it. Believers of this view stand that consumerism gives freedom and uniqueness to people. The consumer here is a creative and active entity moderating his/her own life, self — identity and environment using consumerism intentionally. Free choice is the most important value in contemporary societies. Conrad Lodziak states that consumer culture is a product of imaginative and creative consumers which makes it wholly positive (Lodziak, 2002). He agrees that consumer goods and services appear to surround us, but their influence is not necessarily negative.

The second approach states that the consumer is an abstraction. While in the past ‘customer’ implied a constant and a personal relationship with the supplier, nowadays the customer is replaced by the consumer (an impersonal figure in an impersonal market) which is a source of individual anxiety (Bauman, 1998). A customer had needs chosen by himself and fulfilled by sellers while a consumer has needs created by other people who fulfill them later. According to this view, a consumer is a dupe who is being tricked and behaves irrationally because he is manipulated by advertisers. According to Bauman, consumers need to be constantly exposed to new temptations and the consumed goods must bring satisfaction immediately (Bauman, 1998). Consumerism itself is propelled by corporate desire and the drive to make a profit. In light of the above, consumers are used as puppets.

Whether, consumption is criticized or not, people live in a consumer world and developing consumption is a fact. Steven Miles states that ‘consumerism is arguably the religion of the late twentieth century’ (Miles, 1998, 1).

In days gone by, lifestyle was an expression of class position in a social hierarchy. The display of goods was an important part of a system of reputation and good taste, resulting in division into different social classes. Social distinction was marked by tastes, which were formed as a class habits. Class habits were determined by consumer goods, facilities, and services (Warden, Martens and Olsen, 1999).

An important sphere reflecting class position is culture. In contemporary developed societies culture is strongly connected to and dependent on the market and consumption. A characteristic of present day culture is diversity and simultaneousness of forms and tastes. Tastes are not better or worse nowadays. They are different in a world of variety. Cultural tastes, opinions and consumption patterns have become part of a broader vision of ethical values. People can observe the phenomenon of *dissociation of elites and sophisticated tastes*. Michael Emmison uses a term *cultural mobility* which is a concept referring to the capacity to engage with or consume cultural goods and services across the entire spectrum of cultural life (Emmison, 2003). He emphasizes that cultural mobility is an economic and social term as well as a cultural one. The domain of contemporary culture is not a particular convention (which is predicable) but a co-occurrence of different conventions with their own hierarchies and values.

“OMNIVOROUS” CULTURAL TASTE

According to Bourdieu, a taste is an acquired disposition to mark, appreciate, and establish differences by a process of distinction which is not (or not necessarily) distinct knowledge (Bourdieu, 1984, 466). A cultural taste is a practical mastery of distributions, which makes it possible to sense or intuit what is likely (or unlikely) to befall an individual and therefore to show an individual as occupying a given position in social space (Bourdieu, 1984, 466).

In recent years, the sociological terms *omnivorousness culture* and “an omnivore consumer” were developed within a field of social sciences. The man who coined the term of *cultural omnivorousness* was Peterson who observed that people of higher social status were not averse to participation in activities associated with popular culture (Warde, Wright,

Gayo-Cal, Bennett, Silva, and Savage, 2006). Peterson states that some people are omnivorous because they develop a taste for everything.

According to Peterson and Kern (1996), a snob is a person who does not participate in any lowbrow or middlebrow activity, while an omnivore is a person who is open to appreciating any activity (Peterson & Kern, 1996). It does not mean that the omnivore likes everything. It rather means that he or she is open to appreciate everything. In this sense, omnivorousness is antithetical to snobbishness, which is based on rigid rules of exclusion. It is not important *what* one consumes. The important thing is the way goods of consumption are understood by the individual (Peterson & Kern, 1996). The omnivorousness consumption is not unreflective but is intellectualized. The principal advantage of the cultural omnivore thesis is that it brings into play the whole spectrum of cultural life including high culture, middle culture, and popular culture (Emmison, 2003). Omnivorousness is not necessarily a hierarchy of preferences implying a taste for everything across high and low boundaries, but an increase in the volume of things selectively linked to popular culture (Warde, Wright, Gayo-Cal, Bennett, Silva, and Savage, 2006). Peterson and Kern conducted a survey in 1992 and compared the results with a survey conducted in 1983 to test the hypothesis that highbrow tastes are changing. Both surveys gave people participating in the experiments a list of different types of music (from country music and blues to opera and classical music) and asked the respondents to select music genres they liked. They found out that highbrow omnivorousness had increased. Highbrow people chose different music genres and they were more likely to add lowbrow music genres than middle-brow items (Peterson & Kern, 1996). Results showed also that 1992 highbrow respondents liked more lowbrow music genres than the highbrow respondents from 1983. It is extremely difficult to communicate with other people without any common cultural relations and some authors suggest that developing omnivorous taste is practical because it improves communication between people giving them common cultural areas regardless of their material status.

According to their studies, Peterson and Kern define five factors that may contribute to a person changing from a snob to an omnivore (Peterson & Kern, 1996). The first of the factors is structural change. Various social processes that took place within the past century (broader education, social class mobility, geographic migration, mass media etc.) make exclusion very difficult. Another factor is change within values and differences. The

shift from snobbishness to omnivorousness can be seen as a part of a historical global trend toward greater tolerance of those holding different values. Next, change in the art world has meant that a single standard has become stretched beyond the point of credibility. The quality of art is defined by different channels of creative expression derived from worldwide locations. Finally, generational politics (youth culture has established alternative elite cultures) and status-group politics have both depicted the reality of the global world.

The above mentioned surveys suggest a historical shift in the foundation for having elite status — from snobbish exclusion to omnivorous appreciation. Nowadays, many high-status people are far from being snobs and they are open in their tastes (Peterson & Kern, 1996, 900). Omnivorousness is replacing snobbishness. It is a new form of status distinction through wide rather than snobbish consumption.

A DISCUSSION OF WHETHER OMNIVOROUS CONSUMPTION IS A PHENOMENON THAT DESTABILIZES THE BOUNDARIES OF SOCIAL CLASS, STATUS AND CULTURE

Warde, Martens and Olsen conducted studies of eating out in England (Warde, Martens & Olsen, 1999) and found out that eating in a wider range of venues is associated with social class and with the distribution of cultural and economic capital (Warde, Martens & Olsen, 1999). In fact, omnivorousness is spreading and replacing snobbish attitudes, resulting in greater tolerance. However, there are some problems linked with this change.

Firstly, omnivorousness makes changes in the structure of making different cultural forms widely available which creates a problem in deciding what to choose. Omnivorousness does not consume everything. Having a vast knowledge about culture is an extremely important component of the decision-making process. Warde, Martens and Olsen state that cultural hierarchy is not about a taste, but knowledge about the culture itself (Warde, Martens & Olsen, 1999). Moreover, in Peterson and Kern's studies, it was also found that high-brow people, on average, are better-educated and have more household income. It shows that possessed knowledge and gained education influence people's choices and their tastes. With a good economic and cultural background, it is easier to be a cultural omnivore.

On the other hand, access to knowledge and education is currently much easier than it was in the past and more than anything, a matter of choice and willingness. Other social differences in omnivorousness among people appear at different levels of the occupational hierarchy. High culture (e.g. books and art) is less important, for example, to business people who concentrate on those cultural elements which are business-related (Warde, Martens & Olsen, 1999).

Secondly, omnivorousness is a new quality itself which makes it exclusionary. Tastes are no longer being understood as hierarchically stratified but rather in terms of a contrast between ‘omnivorous’ and ‘univorous’ cultural participation (Emmison, 2003). Nowadays, there are observed new sub-groups within omnivorousness — different kinds of omnivorousness.

Thirdly, there are cultural differences. Lamont (Warde, Martens & Olsen, 1999) compares the ways that upper-middle class men in four cities in the United States and France draw status and social boundaries. National differences were apparent, American men focus more on moral and socio-economic judgments whereas French men focus on cultural refinement and cultural hierarchy. National differences and cultural differences include different quality of education and access to information as well as culture goods.

Next, omnivorousness tends to greater racial, ethnic and cultural tolerance. It has positive effect and makes it possible for different cultural combinations of art, fashion, and food to occur. On the other hand (paradoxically!) the tolerance line is a new criterion of cultural exclusion. Tolerance itself has become a principle of a good taste.

Lastly, it is extremely difficult to talk about taste boundaries and conduct across tastes studies. Omnivorousness is very inconsistent and Warde et. al. (Warde, Wright, Gayo-Cal, Bennett, Silva, and Savage, 2006) found out that among the interviewed participants, there were certainly very few omnivores who corresponded to the definition offered by Peterson.

Jerzy Maksymiuk who is a famous orchestra conductor, calls omnivorous combinations of high and low cultures “a contemporary trend” (Maksymiuk, 2011, 114) and asks if omnivorousness in culture is an ascent or a descent. Then, the whole concept of cultural omnivorousness could be also considered as a temporary trend only.

CONCLUSIONS

Modern (especially Western) societies facing global changes are changing as well. Social boundaries, class boundaries and many other boundaries are vanishing to make way for democratization and tolerance. The contemporary world is a world of consumption and this has been an irreversible change. A concept of omnivorous consumption fits the postmodern way of thinking, which commends variety and uniqueness, free choices and responsibility, to create self-identity. In the present day world, people are supposed to have their own taste and omnivorousness could be the answer for postmodern reality.

As Van Eijck has noted, “cultural boundaries have always been subject to changing definitions, but this has not led to their disappearance” (Van Eijck, 2000, 213). Contemporary omnivorous consumption destabilizes the boundaries of social class, status and culture, but on the other hand it creates other boundaries and limitations.

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