

Kaleidoscope of Tastes

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Taste is an important element in power relationships, since as Norbert Elias and Pierre Bourdieu maintained, good taste is simply the preferences displayed by groups with a certain social standing

Just being told the phrase “That’s just not the done thing!” is bad enough; going ahead and replying with the question “What is the done thing, then?” digs us in even deeper, since we risk exposing our ignorance.

Using a grammatically incorrect expression seems to be more socially acceptable than using a grammatically well-formed phrase which nevertheless contravenes social conventions and begs for correction. That’s the trouble with taste: even though what we say, what we wear, how we behave or even arrange our living space may be perfectly functional, it may also be totally unacceptable within certain social circles. We proclaim things to be “tasteless,” “kitsch,” “rubbish,” yet often have no explanation when challenged. It can be difficult to express in words the standard we are referring to when we claim someone or something lacks good taste.

Taste vs. power

Norbert Elias, the German sociologist of Jewish descent born in Wrocław, published his *Civilizing Process* in 1939, exploring the effects of these types of unspoken standards. He reached the conclusion that, over time, canons of appropriate behavior become increasingly complex and subtle. He also felt that their changeability must reflect the progress reached by a given society; the more severe the limitations imposed on our affectations, impulses and physiology, the more civilized we become.

Progress would be impossible without social forces which slowly impose their standards on their surroundings. This led Elias to conclude that each and every social configuration includes groups who create their position

in the social structure by promoting their own standards of good manners. For example, after the fall of the Roman Empire in Europe, knights, the aristocracy, and burghers adopted and promoted values they believed to be universal standards of excellence. They allowed them to measure everything: behavior, language, beauty, trends, thinking, and emotions. Since the group imposing the canons of behavior was generally best adapted to following them, popularizing them safeguarded their position of power.

It follows that good taste is simply the preferences of groups with a certain standing in social structures; it is impossible to codify, elucidate, or buy. It is not even possible to discover the tenets of good taste other than by observing the lifestyles of people who are deemed to have it. This opens up the field for imitation, but such leeway is indeed limited.

This is the best test of whether one belongs to a group of people bestowed with good taste; an intangible sense that certain things or behaviors are unacceptable, forming the basis for all defined and instinctively reproduced lifestyles grounded in social standing. Elias referred to this as *habitus* or second nature, but the term was later popularized by the guru of French sociology, Pierre Bourdieu.

Symbolic force

Bourdieu also focused on the relationship between taste and one’s position within social structures. He stressed that the *habitus* arises as a result of adopting the lifestyle of the class we are part of by birth. Taste – a sense of what is right and proper – is the most evasive yet most deeply rooted element of the *habitus*. Formed by countless “that’s just not the done thing” feelings and modeled on imitation, we use it instinctively; it is a product of habit. Taste is highly resistant to change whenever we try shifting our *habitus*. It is the most enduring marker of social standing, betraying imitators ruthlessly, sparing only the absolute masters of mimicry.

The model described by Elias and Bourdieu states that each social class has its own, unique *habitus*, characterized by its own tastes. The *habitus* and tastes of the dominant class are aspired to by lower classes, imposed on them with a force branded by Bourdieu as “symbolic.” The societies described by the authors were characterized by a largely stable structure in which levels of cultural capital tend to go hand in hand with position marked

by belonging to a certain class. Some researchers note that this vision is not sufficient to explain present-day societies, in which traditionally-defined class is losing its status as a main indicator of an individual's fate.

Tribal tastes

A contemporary critic of Bourdieu's theory, Michel Maffesoli, posited a thesis that the most important components of present day societies are not class, institutions, political affiliation, or even social movements, but tribes. In his *Time of the Tribes*, he claims that such post-modern tribes focus around common tastes, rather than shared economic interests or political views.

Members of the tribe recognize one another by shared likes and dislikes for beauty, behavior, and so on. However, they do not necessarily share a *habitus* understood as a set of enduring values, views and customs. Maffesoli shows that aesthetic preferences do not coexist permanently, but instead they are reminiscent of the bits of glass in a kaleidoscope. The former world in which laborers lived, thought, wrote, and worked as laborers - completely differently to aristocrats - is giving way to a reality in which everyone can select and combine elements of a myriad canons of taste, joining various tribes with a freedom afforded by modern media and social mobility.

It would seem that replacing class *habitus* by a tribal one means a greater freedom in shaping one's own tastes. The power of the ruling class, and the ruthlessness of the canons of taste imposed by it today seem weaker than when Bourdieu wrote his magnum opus *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*. The neotribal organization does not tolerate symbolic social force. Quite the opposite: rather than dominance of a single complete benchmark, we have a myriad of smaller standards, promoted by individual tribes. This inevitably leads to taste wars.

In a tribal reality, the role of self-styled arbiters of elegance is growing. This is a new clan of dictators of taste, endowed with a specific expert power. They adjudicate the preferences of the masses similarly to the role of judges on popular entertainment shows, whose role it is to decree whether some hapless participant sings nicely or not, even though it is hard to see the basis for their decision. However, there is a marked difference between an aesthetic promoted by a new aristocracy of celebrities and canons represented by traditionally dominant classes: the present situation is marked by a lack of authenticity and creativity.

Artificial habitus

The task of today's dictators of taste involves forming standards combining existing elements of tribal *habitus*. The standards are just as oppressive and arbitrary



Marita Bucholc

Bourdieu stressed that the *habitus* arises as a result of adopting a lifestyle of the class we are part of by birth

as those that existed in the past, although the ideals promoted do not correspond to any real *habitus*. Tastes once followed lifestyles; today, they arise in a social vacuum to create artificial pseudo-*habitus*es - trying to imitate them is like trying to cross the horizon. ■

Further reading:

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