

An analysis of consumerism replacing class in Australian society

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Modern day Australia is moving away from the heritage the English feudal system and is becoming a meritocratic, postmodern society in which the objects we consume make our identities. Both sides of the argument in the way Australia is becoming a consumer society. It will be discussed how Australia is losing its feudal class structure and how consumerism is affecting our nation. How the development of consumerism is forcing a greater divide between structural class by highlighting our social status of the objects we use for our 'identities'. In the conclusion, how we are moving away from structured, class, inherited titles and yet forcing exploitation of the social hierarchy developing in our country through consumerism.

Our social class system is developing from the English feudal system of inherited titles. We are instead showing our class status by consuming objects which are advertised to conform to a certain 'lifestyle' choice. Pierre Bourdieu (2011, as cited in Gernove and Pool; 55) developed his definition of social class using cultural capital, 'the indication of cultural competencies, such as the taste preference, and lifestyle, that differentiate one social class from another and are transmitted through the generations and via the education system.' We develop the identity that we wish to flaunt to the world by conforming to the tastes, preferences and lifestyles of a social class. Consuming the objects that are deemed to be acceptable in those social situations. The individuals will develop their identity based on the products they consume, which will subsequently fit them into a hierarchy dependant on objects symbolism. We must attempt to conform to the 'norms' created by that select group to form a relationship and acceptance within that social standing. Certain behaviours are formed that are appropriate within a class of consumer society, to reject those behaviours would be to move away from a particular social preference and to adhere to another social trend. This is the basis of fluid identity within modern day Australia. Consumerism is

consumed by being individual and free. We have the 'choices' today to decide on a particular identity and a self to show to society.

In choosing an individual identity, we are bound by the social characteristics of the groups we conform to. These social characteristics of group can be illustrated by Weber's theories, defined in *Public Sociology* (Baxter and Western, 2011; 212) by the term status groups; 'Communities or groups of people with a common lifestyle, distinguished from others by a particular non-economic social characteristic. Status groupings can be used to include or exclude people with particular social characteristics.' The status groups proposed by Weber here are very similar to Bourdieu's thoughts on the cultural capital societies. There will be typical behaviours that are regarded as appropriate for members of a certain consumer group in society. The group will be made of various grades of prestige and honour according to the 'rules' of appropriateness of lifestyle exhibited. Prestige is based on a structure of the things you own, the places you choose to shop, the schools you choose to send your children to and the organisations you choose to assimilate yourself with. Using both Weber and Bourdieu's application of social community and hierarchy their theories illustrate how consumerism is slowly replacing our ideals of 'class'. Whereas class is inherited, you will be expected to stay within the confines of that hierarchy, consumerism can be a fluid transition through your life. Mostly, we will stay within the walls of our consumer social group however we must keep consuming the lifestyle that group deems as prestigious to enable us to identify with that community.

The growth in middle class society has developed the need to replace the feudal class hierarchy with identity through consumerism as a way to identify ourselves. For

consumerism to exist there needs to be overproduction through the consumer society to enable the idea of there being choice in our lifestyles. Roland Barthes (1973, as cited in Woodward; 157) developed a theory of the symbolic aspects of consumerism, which highlights the idea of 'identity' that people strive to conform to. Barthes proposes that the objects and symbols we consume develop into the identities we hold. The objects signify qualities that the consumer desires, and is told to desire. The age of consumption supports the ideals we want in constructing our 'self' and identities through 'consumption play', delineating the position we want to hold in society by the objects we consume (Woodward, 2011: 152). Since a rise in the middle classes, during the de-industrialisation period during the 1940's onwards, there has been an abundance in the amount of goods and services available. There has been a drive of an increase in wages, a decrease in manual work and a recognition of a more classless society. This sway in the economy has driven an increase in the levels of production and so our choice in the objects we can consume. An increase in the middle classes means that people are driving more towards developing their identities through objects because everyone is in the same class and can afford to choose to develop their 'self'.

This obsession with self is driven with the ideal of abundance. We have a country that is 'free' enough to enable people to spend money to create the 'self'. As Marx is portrayed in *Public Sociology* (Woodward, 2011: 156), 'objects of consumption have a mythical quality – they promise liberation and utopian possibilities, but deliver domination and a zombie-like ossification.' He is stating that the objects that we consume to develop our 'individual identities' end up consuming us because we are obsessed with the need to keep up with the consumer society we strive to be a part of. In light of advertising and social pressure, we feel we need and desire these objects that will 'make us who we are'. Let us be a part of a group and community. To feel accepted because we wear, act, eat and buy the right objects for that

certain, select consumer group. We have been trained through this 'acceptance', so that consuming will give us happiness, a feeling of joy and achievement that we have developed more of our identity. Fromm (1976: as cited in Woodward: 156) in *Public Sociology*, argues that 'any perceived happiness felt from consuming something is merely superficial and fleeting.' He believes that Western society needs to be developing a sense of distinguishing between the modes of 'having' and 'being', focusing more of the state of 'being' (Woodward, 2011: 156).

So, although it is apparent that Australia is separating from the feudal class system in which we have a distinct segregation through upper, middle and lower class, in which you are born into and expected to stay there. Australia has a less apparent social class system that focuses more on the ability for fluid social identity. This focuses on the individual being able to choose their lifestyle and social group through the objects consumed.

With the growth of consumerism, objects are entrenched in 'desire' and 'need'. We will choose the objects that show the size of our fortune and salaries to be able to fit into the social class of our choice. Consumerism drives companies to exploit the division of the social classes. Instead of Australia having a feudal class system, we now have one that is self-defined. By making a statement with the 'brands' that we buy as to what social group we belong to. The socially disadvantaged groups are segregated by their inability to interact with consumerism. Through the design in cities, housing estates and consumer society, the alienation of the people who cannot afford the affluent objects is apparent in everyday consumer society. Society is succumbing to a 'lifestyle' of dependency upon consuming. The distribution of these consumer goods is a force that ensures the dominance of the Western

culture. Consumption is creating for people a cultural and social differentiation, shaping conscious and consumption, developing an external constraint that forces people through instilling desire. The objects show people the lives they should desire. As Silbey (1997, as cited in Manning) points out, 'consciousness is dominated by the diffusion of images through mass television, and these images of profligate spending and consumer debauchery are inconsistent with the life experiences of vast numbers of people.' Indicated in this quote is the essence of the reality of consumerism. We believe the objects we consume will give us happiness and acceptance into a social identity. Advertising makes people desire the objects for want of a different life. For the lower society classes this is an unreachable goal. There are consuming markets especially for the lower rungs of society who cannot afford the affluent life-styles of the consuming lifestyle. These consumer objects give the lower class consumer the 'identity' of being in that lower social class.

Using the example of a scheme that Coles and Woolworths have developed to enable every variety of consumer to consume their products. Each supermarket has a variety of 'brands' available to each tier of social identity, from the plain packaged cheapest brand, to the carefully designed, marketed most expensive brand. The segregation of social structure is being exploited by creating the same object and marketing it to different social groups, creating a desire for the objects of 'greater' symbolic value. In this, the brand tiering that Coles and Woolworths provides for its consumers forces the marketing of similar products for the exploitation of class segregation. Weber's theories on class stratification can be used where he describes that the consumer is a base for class stratification rather than the feudal system of class. Pakulski (2004, as cited in Germov and Poole: 29) defined this segregation by consumerism as, 'class positions reflected differential market capacities and graded life chances.' Weber's theory on class status reflects the use of consumerism in Cole's and

Woolworth's choice of marketing their products. They will market the same product, to different classes, for different prices as a reflection of the 'status' that individual is attempting to achieve (Germove and Poole, 2011: 29). Sociologist Barthes (1973, as cited in Woodward: 157) uses the identifier of a signifier; an object that is able to refer to something other than itself, to indicate that objects have symbolism which, as consumers, we use to identify ourselves into a certain social class.

Baudrillard's hierarchical model of consumption (Woodward, 2011: 157) can be used to understand how Coles and Woolworths exploit the gap between the social classes. Baudrillard's model uses a three tiered hierarchy of the different types of value contained in a consumer object, much as is used in the product marketing at the supermarkets. At the first level is the functional value, which the objects meets the functionality of the design purpose. The second level considers the exchange value, which encapsulates the consumers ability to afford the object based on their income. The third tier indicates symbolic value of the consumer object. This would be the object signifying a cultural meaning to the consumer. The supermarkets will have separate products on them, marketed to separate 'lifestyles' dependant on the individuals income. The product will carry with it a cultural meaning created upon the price and marketing audience. For example, the generic, cheapest brand will carry with it the cultural meaning that that individual does not have much money, they are cheap and at the lower rungs of consuming society. Whilst the most expensive, carefully packaged products, might be exactly the same as the generic one but holds the symbolic meaning of an individual in a higher hierarchical position. The producers of consumer products exploit individual's needs to conform to a particular identifying social group by marketing their goods with a certain significant 'lifestyle' value that individuals feel they need to aim to achieve.

In conclusion, Australia's class system is being replaced by a consumer society. Postmodernity is developing the social life through the individual's consuming, 'lifestyle' choices. We are expecting a life of hedonism, to have the freedom to choose our identity, to be an individual and to be free from the constraints of our English feudal heritage. With this postmodern drive to be individual and to release ourselves from class hierarchy, we are in fact solidifying the class structure. We are developing our 'selves' through a desire to 'have' which signifies who we are, not of who we are being.

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