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AN ANALYSIS OF CONSUMERISM REPLACING CLASS IN AUSTRALIAN SOCIETY



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INTRODUCTION

~~The structure of Modern day Australian society~~ is moving away from ~~the its~~ heritage - the English feudal system - and is becoming a meritocratic, postmodern society. In our new society in which the objects we consume ~~make~~ define our identities.

~~Both sides of the argument in the way Australia is becoming a consumer society.~~

~~This essay discusses the loss of Australia's It will be discussed how Australia is losing its feudal class structure and its replacement by consumerism how consumerism is affecting our nation. How the development of eC~~Consumerism is forcing a greater divide between ~~structural the classes than its feudalistic predecessor. This effect is a result of~~ by the emphasis placed on highlighting our social status of the objects we use to identify ourselves 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. We have moved from the 'inherited' structure defined by class and title, but have replaced it by a new hierarchy defined by materialism and wealth.~~

SOCIAL CLASS AND CONSUMERISM

Our social class system ~~developed is developing~~ from the English feudal system of stratified classes where the social place of an individual depended on being born into a certain class. Some individuals inherited titles and great wealth while others inherited poverty. By contrast Australians can effectively 'choose' their ~~We are instead showing our~~

42 class status by ~~consuming-possessing~~ objects ~~which are advertised to conform generally~~
43 ~~accepted as conforming~~ to a certain 'lifestyle' choice.

44 Pierre Bourdieu (2011, as cited in Gernove and Pool; 55) ~~developed his definition- put~~
45 ~~forward the idea~~ of social class ~~using and~~ cultural capital. ~~In his opinion this class distinction~~
46 ~~persists by;~~ 'the indication of cultural competencies, such as the taste preference, and
47 lifestyle, that differentiate one social class from another and are transmitted through the
48 generations and via the education system.' ~~In other words w~~We develop the identity that we
49 wish to ~~flaunt show~~ to the world by conforming to the tastes, preferences and lifestyles of a
50 ~~chosen~~ social class. ~~By C~~consuming ~~the~~ objects ~~that are~~ deemed to be acceptable ~~withinin~~
51 ~~the chosen class, those social situations. The~~ individuals ~~will~~ develop their identity based on
52 the products they consume.; ~~This which will subsequently fits~~ them into ~~their new class a~~
53 hierarchy. ~~Exactly where they fit -dependant depends~~ on ~~the~~ object's symbolism. ~~Once they~~
54 ~~have become accepted in a class, individuals~~ ~~We must~~ attempt to conform to the 'norms'
55 created by that select group ~~to form a relationship and acceptance within that in order to~~
56 ~~maintain their~~ social standing. ~~These 'norms' also include C~~certain behaviours ~~are formed~~
57 that are ~~deemed~~ appropriate within ~~a the chosen~~ class ~~of consumer society;~~ ~~T~~to reject those
58 behaviours ~~would be implies the person intends~~ to move away from a particular social
59 preference and to adhere to another social trend.

60 This ~~introduces another feature of modern society - that of ais the basis~~ of 'fluid identity'
61 within modern day Australia ~~- something inconceivable, or nearly so, in feudalism. Inherent~~
62 ~~in Australia's new c~~Consumerism is ~~consumed by the premise that we can be being~~
63 individual and free. We have the 'choices' today to decide on a particular '~~individual~~
64 identity' and ~~can define~~ a 'self' to show to society.

65

INDIVIDUAL IDENTITY AND STATUS GROUPS

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 these groups in *Public Sociology* (Baxter and Western, 2011; 212) by using 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 (reference Bourdieu here). Both Weber and Bourdieu thought that ~~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~~ they show. 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~~ associate 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~~ people are expected to stay within the confines of that hierarchy. By contrast, consumerism ~~can be~~ has the possibility of ~~a~~ fluid transition throughout ~~your~~ life. ~~Mostly, we will~~ In practice however, once a social group has been chosen, we often stay within ~~the walls of our consumer social group.~~ However we must keep consuming the 'right lifestyle': the lifestyle that the social group deems as prestigious to enable us to keep identifying with that ~~community~~ group.

THE GROWTH OF THE MIDDLE CLASSES

90 The growth in middle class society ~~has developed the need to~~ replaced the feudal class
91 hierarchy with identity through consumerism ~~as a way to identify ourselves~~. For
92 consumerism to exist there needs to be overproduction ~~through the consumer society~~ to
93 enable ~~the idea of there being~~ choice ~~in our~~ of lifestyles. However, we do not have as much
94 choice as we think. Roland Barthes (1973, as cited in Woodward; 157) developed a theory of
95 the symbolic aspects of consumerism, ~~which highlights the idea of~~ concerning choice and
96 'identity' ~~that people strive to conform to~~. Barthes proposes that the objects and symbols we
97 consume develop into the identities we hold. These objects signify qualities that the consumer
98 desires, ~~and is but they also signify what they are~~ told to desire. ~~The age of consumption~~
99 ~~supports the ideals we want in constructing our 'self' and identities through 'consumption~~
100 ~~play', delineating the position we want to hold in society by the objects we consume~~
101 ~~(Woodward, 2011: 152)~~. Since ~~a~~ the rise in the middle classes, during the de-industrialisation
102 period during the 1940's onwards, there has been an abundance ~~in the amount~~ of goods and
103 services, ~~available~~. There has been ~~a drive of~~ an increase in wages, a decrease in manual
104 work and ~~a decreased recognition emphasis~~ of ~~a more classless~~ class in society. This change
105 sway in the economy has ~~driven an increase in the levels of production and so~~ resulted in
106 much increased ~~our~~ choice in the objects we can consume. Furthermore, Aan increase in the
107 size of the middle classes means that more people develop ~~people are driving more towards~~
108 ~~developing~~ their identities through objects – simply because ~~everyone~~ more people can
109 afford them. If everyone is in the same class ~~and then they~~ can afford ~~to choose~~ to develop
110 their 'self'. But if objects are being sold, then so is 'self'.

111 THE OBSESSION WITH 'SELF'

113 ~~Our obsession with 'self' is only possible because of the abundance of goods. This~~
114 ~~obsession with self is driven with the ideal of abundance.~~ We have a country that is 'free'
115 enough to enable people to spend money to create the 'self'. ~~As Marx is portrayed quoted in~~
116 *Public Sociology* (Woodward, 2011: 156), says 'objects of consumption have a mythical
117 quality – they promise liberation and utopian possibilities, but deliver domination and a
118 zombie-like ossification.' ~~The objects we consume end up consuming us because we are~~
119 ~~obsessed with the need to keep up with the consumer society. He is stating that the objects~~
120 ~~that we consume to develop our 'individual identities' end up consuming us because we are~~
121 ~~obsessed with the need to keep up with the consumer society we strive to be a part of.~~
122 Advertising and social pressures force us to desire and need objects because objects 'make us
123 who we are'. Objects allow us to be part of a community. We feel accepted because we
124 wear, act, eat and buy the 'right' objects for the group.~~In light of advertising and social~~
125 ~~pressure, we feel we need and desire these objects that will 'make us who we are'. Let us be a~~
126 ~~part of a group and community. To feel accepted because we wear, act, eat and buy the right~~
127 ~~objects for that certain, select consumer group.~~ We have been trained through this
128 'acceptance', so that consuming will give us happiness, a feeling of joy and achievement that
129 we have developed more of our identity. Fromm (1976: as cited in Woodward: 156) in *Public*
130 *Sociology*, argues that 'any perceived happiness felt from consuming something is merely
131 superficial and fleeting.' He believes that Western society needs to be developing a sense of
132 distinguishing between the modes of 'having' and 'being', but focusing more on~~of~~ the state
133 of 'being' (Woodward, 2011: 156).

134

135 ~~So, although it is apparent that~~ Australia ~~is separating~~has left behind ~~from~~ the feudal
136 class system ~~in which we have a distinct segregation through upper, middle and lower class,~~
137 into which ~~you people were~~are ~~born into and expected to stay there and remained.~~ Australia

138 ~~We has now have~~ a ~~less apparent social~~ class system that focuses ~~more on the ability for a~~
139 fluid social identity. This ~~focuses allows on~~ the individual ~~being able~~ to choose their lifestyle
140 and social group ~~– largely~~ through the objects consumed. ~~We now have an abundance of~~
141 ~~goods which allows us to define ourselves. However, as Marx and Fromm point out, goods~~
142 ~~promise us happiness and freedom, but actually ensnare us because they define us – they~~
143 ~~define our social class, our identity and our behaviour.~~

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146 DESIRE VERSUS NEED

147 With the growth of consumerism, objects ~~in-trenched in~~ are associated with ‘desire’ and
148 ‘need’. We ~~will~~ choose ~~those~~ objects that show the size of our fortune, our status and our
149 salaries. ~~These objects help us to be able~~ to fit into the social class of our choice. ~~But it is not~~
150 ~~only the consumer who is doing the choosing - C~~consumerism ~~drives enables~~ companies to
151 exploit the division of the social classes. ~~Instead of Australia having~~ Australia has replaced a
152 feudal class system, ~~we now have~~ with one that is self—defined. ~~By making~~ We make a
153 statement with the ‘brands’ that we buy ~~as to what social group we belong to.~~

154 The socially disadvantaged groups in all countries are ~~segregated defined~~ by their inability to
155 interact with consumerism. ~~Through the design in~~ countries, cities, housing estates and
156 ~~consumer~~ society, the alienation of ~~the~~ people who cannot afford ~~the~~ affluent objects is
157 apparent ~~in everyday consumer society~~. Society is succumbing to a ‘lifestyle’ of dependency
158 upon consuming—~~The.~~ The worldwide -distribution of ~~these~~ consumer goods is a force ~~that~~
159 ~~ensures~~ ensuring the dominance of ~~the~~ Western culture. Consumption ~~is creating for~~
160 ~~people~~ creates a cultural and social differentiation, shaping conscious ness and consumption

161 ~~and~~, developing ~~an external social~~ constraints that ~~forces~~ stratifies people ~~by through~~
162 ~~instilling~~ ~~exploiting~~ desire. ~~The~~ ~~o~~Objects show people the lives they should ~~desire~~ ~~aspire to~~. As
163 Silbey (1997, as cited in Manning) points out, ‘consciousness is dominated by the diffusion
164 of images through mass television, and these images of profligate spending and consumer
165 debauchery are inconsistent with the life experiences of vast numbers of people.’ ~~Indicated in~~
166 ~~this quote is the essence of the reality~~ ~~This gets to the heart of the problem with~~ ~~of~~
167 consumerism. We believe the objects we consume will give us happiness and acceptance ~~into~~
168 ~~a social identity~~. Advertising makes people desire the objects ~~for~~ ~~and makes them~~ want ~~of~~ a
169 different life. For the lower ~~society~~ classes this is an unreachable goal ~~but~~, ~~T~~there are
170 ~~consuming~~ markets especially for the ~~m~~ - ~~lower~~ rungs of society who cannot afford ~~the~~
171 affluent life ~~styles of the consuming lifestyle~~. ~~The way supermarkets market goods provides~~
172 ~~an example of this~~. ~~These consumer objects give the lower class consumer the ‘identity’ of~~
173 ~~being in that lower social class~~.

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176 THE CLASS SYSTEM AND SUPERMARKETS—

177 ~~Using the example of a scheme that~~ Coles and Woolworths have developed ~~a way of~~
178 ~~allowing to enable~~ every ~~variety~~ class of consumer to ~~consume~~ ~~buy~~ their products. Each
179 supermarket has a variety of ‘brands’ available ~~to each tier of social identity~~; from the plain
180 packaged cheapest brand, to the carefully designed, marketed most expensive brand. The
181 segregation of social structure is being ~~exploited~~ ~~used~~ by ~~these companies to creating the~~
182 ~~same object and marketing it the same thing~~ to different social groups ~~simply by~~ creating a
183 desire for ~~the~~ objects of ‘greater’ symbolic value. ~~In this, the brand tiering that Coles and~~
184 ~~Woolworths provides for its consumers forces the marketing of similar products for the~~

185 ~~exploitation of class segregation.~~ Weber's theories on class stratification ~~can be used~~
186 ~~where~~ address this - he describes ~~that~~ the consumer ~~is as~~ a base for class stratification rather
187 than ~~the an imposed~~ feudal system ~~of class~~. Pakulski (2004, as cited in Germov and Poole:
188 29) defined this segregation by consumerism as, 'class positions reflected differential market
189 capacities and graded life chances.' ~~Weber's theory on class status reflects the use of~~
190 ~~consumerism in Coles' and Woolworths' choice of marketing their products. They Coles and~~
191 Woolworths will market the same product, to different classes, for different prices as a
192 reflection of the 'status' that individual is attempting to achieve (Germov and Poole, 2011:
193 29). ~~In a further discussion of this the~~ sociologist Barthes (1973, as cited in Woodward:
194 157) uses the 'identifier' ~~of as~~ a 'signifier'. In other words an object that is able to refer to
195 something other than itself. In the example of Coles and Woolworths marketing the
196 'identifier' ~~to~~ indicates that objects have symbolism which, as consumers, we use to identify
197 ourselves ~~into as belonging to~~ a certain social class.

198

199 FUNCTION, EXCHANGE AND SYMBOLISM

200 Baudrillard's hierarchical model of consumption (Woodward, 2011: 157) ~~can be used~~
201 ~~to understand how~~ is useful in gaining an understanding of how Coles and Woolworths
202 exploit the gap between the social classes. Baudrillard's model uses a three tiered hierarchy
203 of the different types of value contained in a consumer object, much as is used in the product
204 marketing at the supermarkets. At the first level is the functional value, ~~where~~ the objects
205 meets the functionality of the design purpose. The second level considers the exchange value,
206 which encapsulates the consumer's ability to afford the object based on their income. The
207 third tier indicates symbolic value of the consumer object. This ~~would latter tier is~~ the
208 object signifying a cultural meaning to the consumer. The supermarkets will have separate

209 | products on ~~them~~their shelves, marketed to separate ‘lifestyles’ ~~dependant~~defined by the
210 | individual’s income. The product ~~will carry with it~~carries a cultural meaning ~~created~~
211 | ~~upon~~inherent in its ~~the~~ price and marketing audience. For example, the generic, cheapest
212 | brand will carry with it the cultural meaning that that individual does not have much money,
213 | they can only afford cheap goods are cheap and ~~at~~among the lower rungs of consuming
214 | society. Whilst the most expensive, carefully packaged products, might be the same as the
215 | generic one ~~they~~ ~~but holds~~encapsulate the symbolic meaning of an individual in a higher
216 | ~~hierarchical~~social position. Similarly ~~t~~The producers of consumer products exploit an
217 | individual’s needs to conform to a particular ~~identifying~~ social group by marketing their
218 | goods with a certain ~~significant~~ ‘lifestyle’ value, ~~that individuals feel they need to aim to~~
219 | ~~achieve.~~

220

221 | CONCLUSION

222 | In conclusion, Australia’s class system ~~is being~~has largely been replaced by a
223 | consumer society. ~~Postmodernity is developing the~~ Social life ~~is defined by~~through the
224 | individual’s ~~consuming~~ ‘lifestyle’ choices. We are now expecting a life of hedonism. We
225 | ~~expectg,~~ to have the freedom to choose our identity, to be an individual and to be free from
226 | the constraints of our English feudal heritage. With this postmodern drive to be individual
227 | and to release ourselves from class hierarchy, we are in fact solidifying the new class
228 | structure. We are developing our ‘selves’ through a desire to ‘have’ which signifies who we
229 | ~~are,~~ ~~not of whom we are being.~~

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