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8 **AN ANALYSIS OF CONSUMERISM REPLACING CLASS IN AUSTRALIAN SOCIETY**

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INTRODUCTION

The structure of Australian society is moving away from its heritage - the English feudal system - and is becoming a meritocratic, postmodern society. In our new society the objects we consume define our identity.

This essay discusses the loss of Australia's feudal class structure and its replacement by consumerism. Consumerism is forcing a greater divide between the classes than its feudalistic predecessor. This effect is a result of the emphasis placed on the objects we use to identify ourselves. 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 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 class status by posessing objects generally accepted as conforming to a certain 'lifestyle' choice.

Pierre Bourdieu (2011, as cited in Germove and Pool; 55) put forward the idea of social class and cultural capital. In his opinion this class distinction persists by '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.'   In other words we develop the identity that we wish to show to the world by conforming to the tastes, preferences and lifestyles of a chosen social class. By consuming objects deemed to

41 be acceptable within the chosen class, individuals develop their identity based on the

42 products they consume. This fits them into their new class hierarchy. Exactly where they fit

43 depends on the object's symbolism. Once they have become accepted in a class, individuals

44 attempt to conform to the 'norms' created by that select group in order to maintain their

45 social standing. These 'norms' also include certain behaviours that are deemed appropriate

46 within the chosen class . To reject those behaviours implies the person intends to move away

47 from a particular social preference and to adhere to another social trend.

48 This introduces another feature of modern society – that of a of 'fluid identity' within modern

49 day Australia – something inconceivable, or nearly so, in feudalism. Inherent in Australia's

50 new consumerism is the premise that we can be individual and free. We have the 'choices'

51 today to decide on a particular 'individual identity' and can define a 'self' to show to society.

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53 INDIVIDUAL IDENTITY AND STATUS GROUPS

54   In choosing an individual identity, we are bound by the social characteristics of the

55 groups we conform to. Weber defined these groups in *Public Sociology* (Baxter and Western,

56 2011; 212) using the term *status groups*: 'Communities or groups of people with a common

57 lifestyle, distinguished from others by a particular non-economic social characteristic. Status

58 groupings can be used to include or exclude people with particular social characteristics.' The

59 status groups proposed by Weber here are very similar to Bourdieu's thoughts on the cultural

60 capital societies(*reference Bourdieu here*). Both Weber and Bourdieu thought that there will

61 be typical behaviours that are regarded as appropriate for members of a certain consumer

62 group in society. The group will be made of various grades of prestige and honour according

63 to the 'rules' of appropriateness of lifestyle they show. Prestige is based on the things you

64 own, the places you choose to shop, the schools you choose to send your children to and the

organisations you choose to associate yourself with. Weber and Bourdieu's theories illustrate how consumerism is slowly replacing our ideals of 'class'. Where class is inherited, people are expected to stay within the confines of that hierarchy. By contrast consumerism has the possibility of fluid transition throughout life. In practice however, once a social group has been chosen, we often stay within it. 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 group.

THE GROWTH OF THE MIDDLE CLASSES

The growth in middle class society replaced the feudal class hierarchy with identity through consumerism. For consumerism to exist there needs to be overproduction to enable choice of lifestyle. However, we do not have as much choice as we think. Roland Barthes (1973, as cited in Woodward; 157) developed a theory of the symbolic aspects of consumerism, concerning choice and 'identity'. Barthes proposes that the objects and symbols we consume develop into the identities we hold. These objects signify qualities that the consumer desires, but they also signify what they are told to desire. Since the rise in the middle classes, during the de-industrialisation period during the 1940's onwards, there has been an abundance of goods and services. There has been an increase in wages, a decrease in manual work and decreased emphasis of class in society. This change in the economy has resulted in much increased choice in the objects we can consume. Furthermore, an increase in the size of the middle classes means that more people develop their identity through objects – simply because more people can afford them. If everyone is in the same class then they can afford to develop their 'self'. But if objects are being sold, then so is 'self'.

89   THE OBSESSION WITH 'SELF'

90   Our obsession with 'self' is only possible because of the abundance of goods. We

91   have a country that is 'free' enough to enable people to spend money to create the 'self'.

92   Marx quoted in *Public Sociology (*Woodward, 2011: 156), says 'objects of consumption have

93   a mythical quality – they promise liberation and utopian possibilities, but deliver domination

94   and a zombie-like ossification.' The objects we consume end up consuming us because we

95   are obsessed with the need to keep up with the consumer society. Advertising and social

96   pressures force us to desire and need objects because objects 'make us who we are'. Objects

97   allow us to be part of a community. We feel accepted because we wear, act, eat and buy the

98   'right' objects for the group. We have been trained through this 'acceptance', so that

99   consuming will give us happiness, a feeling of joy and achievement that we have developed

100   more of our identity. Fromm (1976: as cited in Woodward: 156) in *Public Sociology*, argues

101   that 'any perceived happiness felt from consuming something is merely superficial and

102   fleeting.' He believes that Western society needs to be developing a sense of distinguishing

103   between the modes of 'having' and 'being', but focusing more on the state of 'being'

104   (Woodward, 2011: 156).

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106   Australia has left behind the feudal class system into which people were born and

107   remained. We now have a class system that focuses on a fluid social identity. This allows the

108   individual to choose their lifestyle and social group – largely through the objects consumed.

109   We now have an abundance of goods which allows us to define ourselves. However, as Marx

110   and Fromm point out, goods promise us happiness and freedom, but actually ensnare us

111   because they define us – they define our social class, our identity and our behaviour.

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114   DESIRE VERSUS NEED

115   With the growth of consumerism, objects are associated with 'desire' and 'need'. We choose

116   those objects that show the size of our fortune, our status and our salaries. These objects help

117   us to fit into the social class of our choice. But it is not only the consumer who is doing the

118   choosing - consumerism enables companies to exploit the division of the social classes.

119   Australia has replaced a feudal class system, with one that is self-defined. We make a

120   statement with the 'brands' that we buy.

121   The socially disadvantaged groups in all countries are defined by their inability to interact

122   with consumerism. In countries, cities, housing estates and society, the alienation of people

123   who cannot afford affluent objects is apparent. Society is succumbing to a dependency upon

124   consuming.   The worldwide distribution of consumer goods is a force ensuring the

125   dominance of Western culture. Consumption creates cultural and social differentiation,

126   shaping consciousness and developing social constraints that stratifies people by exploiting

127   desire. Objects show people the lives they should aspire to. As Silbey (1997, as cited in

128   Manning) points out, 'consciousness is dominated by the diffusion of images through mass

129   television, and these images of profligate spending and consumer debauchery are inconsistent

130   with the life experiences of vast numbers of people.' This gets to the heart of the problem

131   with consumerism. We believe the objects we consume will give us happiness and

132   acceptance. Advertising makes people desire the objects and makes them want a different

133   life. For the lower classes this is an unreachable goal but there are markets especially for

134   them - lower rungs of society who cannot afford affluent life. The way supermarkets market

135   goods provides an example of this.

138 THE CLASS SYSTEM AND SUPERMARKETS

139 Coles and Woolworths have developed a way of allowing every class of consumer to buy

140 their products. Each supermarket has a variety of 'brands' available: from the plain packaged

141 cheapest brand, to the carefully designed, marketed most expensive brand. The segregation of

142 social structure is being used by these companies to market the same thing to different social

143 groups simply by creating a desire for objects of 'greater' symbolic value. Weber's theories

144 on class stratification address this - he describes the consumer as a base for class stratification

145 rather than an imposed feudal system. Pakulski (2004, as cited in Germov and Poole: 29)

146 defined this segregation by consumerism as, 'class positions reflected differential market

147 capacities and graded life chances.' Coles and Woolworths will market the same product to

148 different classes for different prices as a reflection of the 'status' that individual is attempting

149 to achieve (Germove and Poole, 2011: 29). In a further discussion of this the sociologist

150 Barthes (1973, as cited in Woodward: 157) uses the 'identifier' as a 'signifier'. In other

151 words an object that is able to refer to something other than itself. In the example of Coles

152 and Woolworths marketing the 'identifier' indicates that objects have symbolism which, as

153 consumers, we use to identify ourselves as belonging to a certain social class.

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155 FUNCTION, EXCHANGE AND SYMBOLISM

156   Baudrillard's hierarchical model of consumption (Woodward, 2011: 157) is useful in

157 gaining an understanding of how Coles and Woolworths exploit the gap between the social

158 classes. Baudrillard's model uses a three tiered hierarchy of the different types of value

159 contained in a consumer object, much as is used in the product marketing at the

160 supermarkets. At the first level is the functional value where the objects meets the

161 functionality of the design purpose. The second level considers the exchange value, which

162 encapsulates the consumer's ability to afford the object based on their income. The third tier

163 indicates symbolic value of the consumer object. This latter tier is the object signifying a

164 cultural meaning to the consumer. The supermarkets will have separate products on their

165 shelves, marketed to separate 'lifestyles' defined by the individual's income. The product

166 carries a cultural meaning inherent in its price and marketing audience. For example, the

167 generic, cheapest brand will carry with it the cultural meaning that that individual does not

168 have much money, they can only afford cheap goods and among the lower rungs of

169 consuming society. Whilst the most expensive, carefully packaged products, might be the

170 same as the generic one they encapsulate the symbolic meaning of an individual in a higher

171 social position. Similarly the producers of consumer products exploit an individual's need to

172 conform to a particular social group by marketing their goods with a certain 'lifestyle' value.

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174 CONCLUSION

175   In conclusion, Australia's class system has largely been replaced by a consumer

176 society. Social life is defined by the individual's 'lifestyle' choices. We are now expecting a

177 life of hedonism. We expectg to have the freedom to choose our identity, to be an individual

178 and to be free from the constraints of our English feudal heritage. With this postmodern drive

179 to be individual and to release ourselves from class hierarchy, we are in fact solidifying the

180 new class structure. We are developing our 'selves' through a desire to 'have' which signifies

181 who we are.

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