The consumer society: Has the signification of the product become more important than its functionality?

This paper aims to provide an explanation for the consumption of certain commodities for their signification, rather than their function. To illustrate the importance of commodities, the emergence of football as a middle class spectator sport will be analysed. This essay will try to illustrate what the processes are behind the changes in football spectatorship, as in recent years football crowds have become more diverse in relation to their class. Typical views surrounding the influence of the middle classes within football spectatorship, has centred on economic reasons stating that the working classes were effectively 'priced out of the market'. However, through the work of Baudrillard a different more subtle interpretation can be illustrated. This view shows that working class values have changed, and as a consequence of the consumer society, the working classes ultimately consume commodities to signify a higher status. Therefore, it can be theorised that the consumption of football spectatorship is simply a reflection of the changing values and behaviour that underpins the working classes.

To understand the processes behind class spectatorship at football matches, firstly an explanation of the theories which underpin consumption must be provided. Consumers are essentially individualistic and have the same needs and desires; this is how economic theory explains the demands of consumers. However, it can be argued that this assumption is wrong and misleading, since not all consumers have the same needs and desires.

This false assumption has lead many to focus on the economy as a social phenomenon; two of the most prominent theorists are seen to be Bourdieu and Baudrillard. Their work demonstrates that by focusing on the consumer as a social phenomenon a clear difference is created between this view and that of the economist. 'Their rational choice has here become conformist choice, the choice of conformity. Needs are directed not so much towards objects as towards values, and their satisfaction initially has the sense of signing up to those values' (Baudrillard, 1998, p70).

Many theorists argue that needs are interdependent and are the product of a learning process, 'choices are not made at random, but are socially controlled and reflect the cultural model within which they are made. It is not just meaning with regard to a system of values' (Baudrillard, 1998, p70).

As shown Baudrillard argues that taste is a social phenomenon, and can be seen not as the result of individualistic choices but taste is socially patterned. An important factor of Bourdieu's analysis is his use of habitus; 'a system of dispositions, a system which organizes the individual's capacity to act' (Lury, 1996, p83). Lury (1996) illustrates that habitus is prominent in many of the individuals preferences about the appropriateness and validity of his or her taste in many aspects such as art, food and clothing etc. 'It is shaped primarily in childhood, within the family and through schooling, by the internalization of a given set of material conditions' (Lury, 1996, p83). Therefore an individuals habitus is shaped by or linked to their specific groups, in addition a most important point in Bourdieu's research is the linking of habitus to 'class position' (Lury, 1996, p83).

Habitus is often viewed as a flexible framework which enables the individual to make sense of social experience, 'a stable, although never static, set of classifying principles. It is the application of these principles as a distinctive mode of cultural consumption which is recognised as taste, or lack of it' (Lury, 1996, p86).

By applying Bourdieu's work surrounding habitus and how taste is socially patterned, an insightful look can be provided into class segregation within our modern society.

> 'The immediacy of working people's tastes derives from the immediacy of their work experience, and the pressure imposed by their needs. A person who carries out manual labour, and whose access to the basics of sustenance and comfort is not guaranteed, has a respect and desire for the sensual, physical and immediate' (Lury, 1996, p86).

Conversely, there are individuals that have been brought up with concepts of 'education' and 'mental labour'. 'They are certain of obtaining daily necessities which cultivates a distance from these needs, and affects a taste based in respect and desire for the abstract, distanced and formal. These objective conditions are interiorized through habitus as desire expressed in taste' (Lury, 1996, p86). As shown Bourdieu theorised that our taste is socially constructed, but in addition it also enables us to challenge values held by other members of society.

'As part of the process of social reproduction, classes in competition with each other attempt to impose their own habitus or system of classification on other classes, as part of their more general struggle to become dominant' (Lury, 1996, p88).

However, more often than not instead of challenging the values of the upper classes, the lower classes simply try to emulate the upper classes. Upper classes posses items which seem exclusive, therefore if these items are purchased an attempt is being made to produce an image likened to the upper classes, illustrating a greater social position than which is actually held. 'Groups of individuals use goods to make distinctions between themselves and other groups of individuals, and thus supports the view that consumption practices can be understood in terms of a struggle over social positioning' (Hebdige, 1988; Cited in Lury, 1996, p80).

This allows for the judgement that when we change our possessions, the only function this serves is to change our position upon the hierarchal ladder. 'Ultimately, it is the difference of choices between one society and another and the similarity of choices within the same society which force us to consider consumer behaviour as a social phenomenon' (Duesenberry, 1949; Cited in Baudrillard, 1998, p70). Baudrillard illustrates that goods do not just exist for their functionality, but in addition, they are filled with symbolic meaning. Goods are a valuable aid in describing the social struggle that occurs within our society.

Goods are always framed in a cultural context; even the use of the most obscure objects can signify cultural meaning. 'Beyond commerce, that is, it is not restricted to commerce, but is always a cultural as well as economic phenomenon. It is to do with meaning value and communication as much as it is to do with exchange, price and economic relations' (Douglas & Isherwood, 1979, p10).

Therefore, goods signify much more than just a function, there are practices in place which enable the use of goods to signify the rejection of marginalisation from the masses. 'Individuals will adopt strategies to make sure that they are not marginalised by the system' (Lury, 1996, p14).

Thus, certain members of society possess certain items in order to signify that they possess a higher cultural capital, than their economic capital will naturally allow.

> 'The dominant class constitutes a relatively autonomous space whose structure is defined by the distribution of economic and cultural capital among its members, each class fraction being characterised by a certain configuration of this distribution to which there corresponds a certain life style, through the mediation of the habitus' (Bourdieu, 1984 , p260).

This illustrates how people in society are involved in a dynamic process. Trends originate in the higher echelons of society, and in an effort to simply demonstrate that an individual possess a high cultural capital, they will emulate the upper classes. However, as mentioned this is a dynamic process so the upper classes will never be caught up, they will have moved on to a new trend by the time the old one has filtered down to the lower classes.

Although, this dynamic process highlights the downfalls within Baudrillard's analysis of society, as Baudrillard's theory fails to accommodate for trends originating with the working classes and rising up the social ladder. Baudrillard states that the working class consume commodities associated with the upper classes to signify a higher societal status. However, Baudrillard's work does not acknowledge that trends can originate within the working classes and then become popular.

Certain trends within society illustrate that trends do not simply trickle down the social ladder, but they can also ultimately rise up the ladder. As this is a relatively new perspective, the amount of research surrounding this phenomenon is almost non-existent. However, one example of trends originating with the lower classes and becoming popular amongst the middle classes is demonstrated through the phenomenon of football spectatorship.

There are two distinct views surrounding class spectatorship at football matches, however, it is clear that each view respectively rejects or accepts Baudrillard's theory. The first view discussed can be considered the typical view held by many sociologists, extensive work of this specific topic has been conducted by sociologists such as Ian Taylor and Chas Critcher. They provided a set of Marxist arguments which have explained the apparent problems of English football.

> 'The old working-class supporters with their subcultural *soccer consciousness* that centred on the local team, masculinity, active participation, and victory were being squeezed out, to be replaced by the *genuine,* middle-class spectators and their presumed interest in family football, spectacle, skill, and performative efficiency' (Taylor, 1971b; Cited in Giulianotti, 2002, p27).

Working class supporters found themselves effectively being 'priced out of the market'; football was gradually becoming one of the most commercially driven institutions within society. Football clubs were ultimately driven by profits, which they realised could be further heightened through incorporating classes which posses a higher economic capital.

‘Generally, it was submitted that football support was being commodified, mo st obviously through a pursuit of wealthier audiences to attend games, a process underpinned by the attempts of the game’s controlling forces to reinvent its social relations’ (Ian Taylor, 1971a; Cited in Giulianotti, 2002, p27).

Consequently, it can be stated that football has undergone many changes since the late eighties, many argue that football changed its values and key to its success was its commodification. Giulianotti (2002) illustrates that the commodification of football is one of the key processes, in its ever-growing shift away from the working classes. Basically, working class fans were being traded in for new more economically profitable middle class fans.

> ‘One area of substantial discussion over the past decade has concerned the impact of football’s new political economy on its grassroots custodians, the football spectators. In the United Kingdom, there have been persistent criticisms of this boom on the basis that established (but relatively poorer) football spectators are being squeezed out of any stakeholder position within their clubs, most notably the biggest ones, in exchange for wealthier new spectators’ (Giulianotti, 2002, p25).

However, the typical view of football spectatorship, where the middle classes replace the working class brings up an interesting point, as this demonstrates the limitations of Baudrillard’s theory. As previously stated Baudrillard’s theory fails to accommodate for trends originating within the lower classes and progressively rising up the social ladder, as his work demonstrates that trends become popular within the higher classes, then trickle down to the lower classes. Although, football spectatorship can b viewed as a reversal of Baudrillard’s theory, as football started off as a game dominated by the working classes, where over time it was incorporated as a middle class past time, illustrating a rise in trends from the lower classes.

Although, it must be noted that there is a thin line between the two perspectives surrounding class spectatorship at football matches. The latter of the views supports the work of Baudrillard, offering a more subtle approach to football spectatorship; however, there is little to no empirical research surrounding the second perspective so utilising Baudrillard's work generates a relatively new perspective whilst discussing class spectatorship at football matches.

As shown initially it was theorised by many sociologists that the working classes have been replaced by the middle classes, however, a different interpretation can be drawn from the commercialisation of football. Football has developed along middle class values such luxury, service and choice, therefore, it is inevitable that the working classes whilst consuming football are going to be viewed as middle class. Consequently, when supporters follow a football team they will be branded as middle class, as by attending the matches they will be reproducing many of the values such as luxury associated with the middle class.

Thus, it can be hypothesised that through theories of consumption the working classes have changed, this change is shown through football spectatorship. Football spectatorship illustrates the processes which underpin the changes within the working class; as working class values and behaviour has changed in many ways, football spectatorship is merely a reflection of these changes.

Traditional working class fans who viewed themselves as *members* are now seen and grouped with middle class fans, who are seen as *customers*. 'The customer has fewer fixed loyalties; club involvement is relatively more instrumental, being rooted in the satisfaction of public wants' (Critcher, 1979: Cited in Giulianotti, 2002, p27).

As this is a new perspective of football spectatorship, many from the working classes may argue it to be false, as they could argue that they are real fans as they are the true *members*. However, due to the commercialisation of football they will always be seen as products of incorporation into the commercialised phenomenon of modern football spectatorship, as they are now themselves through being a football spectator illustrating to others that they are middle class.

> 'Goods are endowed with value by the meaning of fellow consumers… Each person is a source of judgements and a subject of judgements; each individual is in the classification scheme whose discriminations he is helping to establish… The kind of world they create together is constructed from commodities' (Douglas & Isherwood, 1979, p14).

Therefore, through the use of Baudrillard's work it can be theorised that the working classes were not replaced, but through many different processes within society their values and behaviour was. So, if supporters adopt the new commercialised version of football, along with it they adopt the values of the middle classes. However, it must be noted that much care needs to be attributed to the issues surrounding class spectatorship, as modern commercialised football could be going down a path of destruction.

Some in the working classes do not wish to signify a higher status whilst watching football, they would rather have their old form of working class football, prior to the commercialisation of the sport. It can be argued that as a consequence of this the working classes have set about a de-humanising of the sport. As many believe that a consequence of the commodification of football is football hooliganism 'Football hooliganism is best understood as a working-class resistance movement. Bourgeoisification, the process against which the resistance is directed' (Taylor, 1971; Cited in Dunning et al, 1988, p25).

Therefore, it has emerged that issues surrounding class spectatorship at football matches, is an area that needs much further research. A theme which was evident throughout this study was the lack of empirical research, consequently no true conclusions could drawn surrounding class spectatorship. Therefore, any attempts at determining conclusions of class spectatorship would be dangerous, until further research is conducted.

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