

Snobbery and the triumph of bourgeois values: a speculative analysis of implications for hospitality

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This is a 'small' paper that offers a broad-brush view of the nature of bourgeois values and implications of the same for our understanding of certain aspects of hospitality. The argument is speculative, but assertive. Bourgeois values, it is suggested, are inevitably snobbish in nature and designed to both construct and maintain largely irrelevant 'cultural' differences between and within social classes. This generation of difference is integrally consistent with the capitalist mode of production, facilitating the creation of demand for essentially artificial needs and wants. In the context of hospitality, bourgeois values sustain a language of hierarchy that simultaneously creates a culture of aspiration while allowing enterprises to extract optimum economic value from carefully segmented markets.

Keywords: bourgeois culture, social class, snobbery, hospitality, food and drink consumption

Introduction: What is a bourgeois value?

This speculative, conceptual paper is intended to contribute, in a small way, to the activity of theorising about hospitality and hospitality management. The nature of bourgeois values is amongst many potential topics for analysis largely neglected by the traditional 'social sciences' (philosophy, economics, psychology, sociology). A bourgeois value is a value that, when articulated, seeks to obscure, by use of either specific language terms or particular actions of a euphemistic nature, some reality that offends against a perceived general sensibility or sensibilities.

Traditional accounts of the rise of the bourgeoisie suggest that their values are derived from emulating traditional élites, which, in Marxist terms at least, the bourgeoisie grow to displace and supplant. There are dangers in accepting this perspective uncritically. *First*, there is contemplative evidence suggesting otherwise – i.e. many bourgeois values often differ substantially from those of traditional élites. The single best example here is the place and equipment employed for the purpose of receiving human biological waste. The preferred bourgeois term (a portmanteau word covering both place and equipment) is 'lavatory' or 'loo' and the word 'toilet' is very much frowned upon as a lower class expression. In conventional accounts of this bourgeois preference, note is often made of the origins of the word lavatory in the Latin term for 'to wash' and allusion is made to the 'lavatorium', the room in monasteries where monks would wash their hands prior to eating. Knowing this, it rapidly becomes apparent that a lavatory is the last place to which a civilised person would retire in order to engage in excretion. In monastic terms, the word latrine or more specifically reredorter or necessarium would be appropriate but neither is easily transmogrified into an English word. Upon examining the etymology of the word 'toilet' it also becomes clear that this is an equally inappropriate term.

What we are to call this place of easement will no doubt remain a controversial matter.

Maintaining the 'lavatorial' theme, we have also noted that a bourgeois value can obscure something perceived as distasteful through action(s) as well as words. Thus we encounter the proletarian (and thus derided) practice of using a 'toilet set' comprising a fabric bath mat, a fabric cover for the upper toilet seat and a 'drip' mat placed around the base of the pedestal. Persons of refinement use a towel or nothing to stand on when descending from a bath/shower, a seat cover is unnecessary and therefore vulgar, and no gentleman, let alone a lady, would be so common as to 'drip' anything on the floor in the front of the pedestal.

The manner in which vocabulary in particular reveals class values is a recurring theme in Anglophone culture. Ross (1954), a linguistics professor, coined the terms 'U' and 'non-U' to refer respectively to class-based preferences for certain terms over others, 'U' terms being those of the upper class and thus preferred by the bourgeoisie. His work was popularized by Nancy Mitford (e.g. 1956; a list of certain U and non-U words can be found in *Wikipedia*, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/U_and_non-U_English [Accessed 29 October 2013]). The role of language in maintaining social difference has continued both as a focus of serious academic research (e.g. Bernstein 1971, whose work on restricted and elaborated linguistic codes remains influential) and more populist but no less well informed attention (e.g. Fox 2005).

A *second* guard against accepting explanations of the origin of bourgeois values as simple adaptations of those of traditional ruling élites is evidence from so-called 'figurational' sociologists who suggest that changes in value systems are not random but influenced by a 'civilizing process'. The term 'civilising process' (Elias 2000, Mennell 1985) refers

to behavioural trends towards greater levels of human self-discipline, self-control, and rising standards of shame and embarrassment in interpersonal interaction. Elias (2000) argues that these new standards of behaviour are largely the product of the secular upper class, but that they filter down the social order, not *simply* emulated but rather adopted in selective, slow and uneven ways. Crudely expressed, the figurational view is that values and behaviour 'function' to differentiate social groups/classes, from other social groups/classes perceived as being inferior.

A comedy sketch from the early 1960s BBC television programme *The Frost Report* illustrates this point (Feldman and Law, 1966). Three English men of descending height stand in a line: the tallest is upper class and dressed in the (then) stereotypical uniform of his tribe; next to him is a middle class man also stereotypically dressed. Finally there is a short working class man, also 'appropriately' attired. The upper class man states that though he has breeding he has no money. The middle class man has money but admits he is vulgar, which is why he looks up to the upper class man but down on the working class man. The working class man 'knows his place' and gets a pain in the neck looking up to the others. The specific allusion here is to the decline of traditional upper-class power and wealth (based primarily on the ownership of land) and the triumph of the bourgeoisie and bourgeois values (predicated on the ownership and management of industrial capital).

Other than the classical Marxism on which we depend for our understanding of the emergence of the bourgeois classes (the plural here is quite deliberate for it is recognized that no class is entirely, objectively, homogeneous), the figurational approach presents a ready source of understanding and evidence on the nature of bourgeois values and expression. It is often criticised for underrating the force of counter-civilising processes – those that work in the opposite direction to the civilising process and therefore limit or distort it (represented neatly in the comic sketch described above by the upper-class man's lament that he has no money thus on occasion is required to look up to the middle class man). Further, other social scientific concepts can help in understanding how bourgeois values are given expression (e.g. Georg Simmel on the social role of the *flâneur*, Thorstein Veblen (1899/2007) on the leisure class, and Bourdieu's excavation of class-based values in France (Bourdieu 1984).

To summarise thus far, two points can be made. First, whereas at least some (early) bourgeois values resulted from the emulation of those of traditional élites, the assumption that societies continually evolve requires acceptance of the idea that such values can be independently originated. Secondly, in many capitalist societies a (differentiated) bourgeoisie has become the quantitatively dominant social class and accordingly, following Marx, their values have become the dominant (if, internally, competing) values. Where the bourgeoisie has achieved numerical supremacy at the expense of both traditional élites and subordinate classes, the creation and maintenance of bourgeois values is an activity most vital *within* that class as the various segments within it battle to circumscribe a particular identity.

Snobbery, bourgeois values and hospitality

In most works of reference the phenomenon of snobbery is

defined relative to the term 'snob', 'a person who believes in the existence of an equation between status and human worth' (*Wikipedia*, last accessed 29.10.13) and 'One who tends to patronize, rebuff, or ignore people regarded as social inferiors and imitate, admire, or seek association with people regarded as social superiors' plus also 'One who affects an offensive air of self-satisfied superiority in matters of taste or intellect' (<http://www.thefreedictionary.com/snob> [Accessed 2 November 2013]). Snobbery, at best, is defined as 'snobbish behaviour' (*Chambers Dictionary*, iOS Application) and is thus a structured, hierarchical phenomenon and in most, though not all, definitions carries negative overtones.

As we have seen, it is unwise to assert that all bourgeois values are imitative of those of social superiors. It is easier to argue that all bourgeois values are to a greater or lesser extent snobbish in character as their single purpose is to establish a difference of superiority over others. Yet, at that lesser extent, it is necessary to recognise that a bourgeois value may appear normative and unexceptional. When Agatha Christie's Hercule Poirot comments that he has 'a thoroughly bourgeois attitude to murder' (in the novel *Cards on the Table*, 1936) he means that he disapproves of it and sees the function of society as to apprehend and punish murderers. There would be little dissent from such values among any class, let alone the bourgeoisie.

It is only as one ascends the gradient of such values that they become more contentious, especially where such values are required to subordinate biological necessities to cultural imperatives. We have already dealt with one example of this in the case of the toilet/lavatory distinction but the other self-evident case is one at the heart of hospitality/hospitality management, that necessary precursor to excretion, namely the consumption of food and drink. Indeed, in Ross's (1954, 135–139) original list of 39 items of 'U' and 'Non-U' vocabulary, some 25% have a direct link with such consumption and Ross (1954, 139) writing of the distinction between 'napkin' (U) and 'serviette' (non-U) notes that it is 'perhaps the best known of all the linguistic class-indicators of English'. Food and beverage (and especially wine) are powerful instances of phenomena that are routinely the subject of snobbery both generally, and in the 'professions' which attend them. Yet food and wine snobbery, like bourgeois values, are not popular topics of social scientific or hospitality research. With regard to the latter, reference to the academic journal database *Emerald* for a search of the key word 'snobbery' (as of 27.10.13) yielded 202 results of which 13 articles (6.4%) were about wine, one about food, one about tourism and one about the food industry. A similar search (also as of 27.10.13) of the *EBSCO Hospitality and Tourism Complete* database yielded nineteen results of which five and four articles respectively were directly concerned with food and wine snobbery.

With regard to wine we find that implicit hierarchies of the wine product are frequently articulated and contested – for example, French wines are better than all other 'nationalities' of wine. Then there is the 'appreciation' – actually evaluation – of wine which employs its own, often satirised, vocabulary ('a precocious little wine, impertinent but not rude, with a slight hint of blackberries and a propensity to surprise with a benign aftertaste') and can be formally accredited by qualifications, the most prized of which is a Master of Wine (MW). Of incidental note is that such processes of *faux* refinement are also evident with tea, coffee, mineral water and beer. UK marketing guru

Rory Sutherland (2013) beginning from the proposition that ‘most wine is actually rubbish’ draws on Freud’s concept of the narcissism of small differences to argue that:

...trivial product variations are created to provide ‘an ersatz sense of otherness which is only a mask for an underlying uniformity and sameness’. In other words, the absurd complexity of wine may be essential to its popularity. For the drinker to demonstrate status and connoisseurship, it is necessary for the category to be absurdly hard to navigate, so providing opportunities for contrived, hair-splitting distinctions that let the buyer advertise his own discernment (<http://www.spectator.co.uk/life/the-wiki-man/8925721/why-does-anyone-drink-wine/> [Accessed 7 November 2013])

The triumph of bourgeois values is even more evident with food than with wine. We can point, first, to French as the meta-language not only of haute cuisine but of hotel management more generally, a reflection of the dominance of France in culinary, cultural and diplomatic matters pre-revolution and for some time after. Mennell (1985) argues that the growth of the hotel and restaurant industry has encouraged culinary democracy, culinary pluralism and a corresponding decline in the prestige hierarchy of food which places French haute cuisine at its apex. Some of these claims seemed somewhat suspect even when inscribed in the 1980s (see Wood 1995). Although the role of French haute cuisine may have been diminished as both a model and exemplar, the production and consumption of elite food from other nations retains a disproportionate and excluding grip on public and private consumption, in the former the Michelin and similar restaurant rating systems providing the aspirational model for professionals and serious amateurs alike (for a more nuanced view of these issues see Lane 2010) in the latter restaurant reviews function to maintain bourgeois advantage in the exclusiveness of the system (see Williamson et al. 2009).

Secondly here, we can point to Elias’s (2000) and Mennell’s (1985) analysis of the differentiation of eating implements (both cutlery and crockery). Medieval convention favoured eating from a common bowl often with one’s own personal ‘cutlery’, typically a knife. The ‘refinements’ we have seen since then have much of their origins in aristocratic adoption but the biggest leap in differentiation surely came with the rise of the industrial bourgeoisie so that we now have myriad types of pointless cutlery and crockery relevant to the consumption of particular types or categories of food, both artfully satirised by John Betjeman’s poem *How to get on in Society* (1958, see for example <http://everything2.com/title/How+To+Get+On+In+Society> [Accessed 9 November 2013]).

Conclusions and implications

This paper has sought to enunciate some categorical observations about bourgeois values. Within the confines of a short discussion paper it is not possible to consider even a majority of the arguments contingent on these observations. It has been argued that the purpose of bourgeois values, which are by definition characterised by snobbery, is to maintain social difference through artifice, but this tells us little about why it is necessary to maintain such difference in the first place.

The answer of course is that bourgeois values sustain a view of the world as those who articulate such values would like it

to be, rather than as it is, thus embodying a self-serving retreat from social realism (Callinicos 1990). Accordingly, the implications of these values for the hospitality industry and hospitality management/education are more or less the same as they are for understanding the generic forms of these concepts. Bourgeois differentiation generates a range of essentially unnecessary, superfluous and *faux* alternatives (in the Poncian rendering of Occam’s razor it offends against the principle that entities must not be multiplied beyond necessity) in products, services and ‘lifestyles’. Such processes are vital to the maintenance of demand in capitalist economies. Pace, Lockwood (1960), who could not foresee the levels of differentiation of which capitalist production was capable when he famously commented that not all consumer goods are wanted for their status connotations (‘a washing machine is a washing machine is a washing machine’), pointless differentiation designed to appeal to status consciousness is the very lifeblood of modern capitalist production.

In the language of strategic management, all firms require threshold capabilities – those that allow them to enter and operate at a minimum level in a given market. A hotel that did not offer a bed to sleep in might encounter difficulties in attracting guests, but beyond the bed, many ‘budget’ hotels offer varying combinations of some, all or none of the products and services historically associated with such establishments. Hotels, and many restaurants and other hospitality organisations, like other products and services, are differentiated by ‘brand’ a brand being part of a fundamentally hierarchic system of projected values supposedly related, objectively, to the range of products/services/facilities offered (and the price charged) but in reality, appealing to more complex arrangements of fundamentally ephemeral factors related to self-image, self-worth and status. As with food and beverage, the products and services offered embody, in the Barthesian sense, semiotic codes which communicate messages about the suitability (in terms of both financial resources and cultural capital – values) of an offer to various markets.

There will be many justifiable objections to what has been written in this paper. What is offered is, after all, a dilute and vulgar Marxist snapshot of what might, nevertheless, if properly developed, be a useful perspective on aspects of practice and performance in the hospitality industry. Like management as a subject in general (and unlike tourism ‘studies’), academic hospitality management has failed to establish intellectual credibility as a subject area because many of its practitioners have resisted attempts to ground it in the wider ‘real’ world of historical, economic and social forces. It is indeed the case that those who do not know history are doomed to repeat it.

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