

The New Urban Culture

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Abstract:

An introduction on the transition into post-fordism and the rise of the “new middle class”.

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(article starts on next page)

The New Urban Culture

Recently, cities have been growing exponentially, mainly due to the migration into urbanised areas. The contemporary world (particularly the “globalised” world) is facing a new conception of urban life, where social classes have been taking another meaning different to what has been always conceived about class distinctions. In other words, there are new perspectives about class in relation to its activities and its own conception of the world. Mainly, the changes in economic, political and social meanings in everyday life (and in relation to the urban way of living) affect directly the way people act.

Since the rise of the machine last century, society was in the process of generalisation by following a production and consumption line, in which every possible effort was made to make simpler, faster, easier and more accessible the products that were meant for everybody to reach. Mass production meant mass market, transformed therefore into mass culture. Standardisation in the productivity was filtered in all levels of urban life: from the nine-to-five jobs to the standard family with standard house in the standard suburb, as well as every layer of the fabric of society. This process, called 'Fordism' “involves a rigid division of labour, both vertical and horizontal, and its main component, the assembly line, reflects its main goals of organized production and cost-effective manufacturing” (Rubala). Class distinctions (as well as job positions) were very fixed during this period, and each class had very specific profile, which could not be very flexible either. Having a job meant being safe, because it would last for decades. As Bill Breen puts it, “the ‘organization man’ of the 1950s, worked for a company for life, and his social behaviour was defined by that vertical organization” (Breen 2001). In this safety, Fordism brought many advantages to the development of a better way of living for workers, providing decent homes and structures. But the rigidity of this system (for traditional systems do not allow flexibility) carried many disadvantages. One of the main problems of Fordism was the economic crisis that brought unemployment due to the replacement of people for more efficient machinery. And also, in a social level, the system swallowed the spark of life of its people by getting ordinary, dull and boring.

Even then, the first step towards a change in urban lifestyle was developed under the rigidity of the social hierarchy. Consumption was the reaction of production, but it soon was about to take a turn, affecting the way society behaves. People were able to choose the products that suited their personalities, and there was a (small but) considerable freedom of choice.

The Fordist era summarises the attempts for a simplification of society, for a high efficiency in order to be more “modern”. But the inclusion of everything left the sensitive side of life excluded. According to Marshall Berman, “If we listen closely to twentieth-century writers and thinkers about modernity and compare them to those of a century ago, we will find a radical flattening of perspective and shrinkage of imaginative range”, and this in fact is the weak point of Fordism (as it is included in the “modern” movement of last century, where “open visions of modern life have been supplanted by closed ones, Both/And by Either/Or”. (1988: 24).

Berman's point of view about modernism opens up the discussion about how modernism has evolved into a new and different world, which is often called postmodernism, but the term has led into different discourses of which I will not speak now. Nevertheless, it is important to stress that modernism was not a fad that came to life and death, as Victor Juarez puts it, "it is absurd to speak of a Modern Movement limited to half a century" (2003: 40) especially because society keeps "modernising" itself into more and more complicated fabrics of classes and relations, which means that not only modernism is still applicable, but the very term "postmodernism" still carries the same word in its back. The fact that our way of thinking has, as Berman puts it, "shrank" into contradictions, only emphasises this growth in the level of modernity into a high and never before seen exaggeration of parts.

After the clash of Fordist systems, society has found itself looking for other priorities to take the place of "efficiency" and production. Since then, life in cities has changed from a chain to a knot, in which urban culture takes up a higher space in the mind of citizens. The perfect suburban family has grown and its integrants have exploited outside of the suburban home into different goals. The children that played in its wide streets are now looking for a lifestyle where all the city activities take place. The house feels bigger and bigger for the parents, and the distance from there to the entertainment areas is growing. Life is focusing more than ever in the consumption side of the balance. But why is all of this happening and what is it becoming? Chris Hamnett gives a clear distinction between the old Fordist era and the contemporary Postfordism:

With the long decline of manufacturing industry and the growing importance of the service sector, particularly financial, business and professional services such as law, advertising, management consultancy, public relations and public services such as health and education, the occupational structure of modern Western societies has changed dramatically.

Jobs are no longer based on the old structure of hierarchy which followed the production line system in industrialism, and these changes have affected not only the way society is organised, but also the importance of a job position has contaminated all other aspects in life.

There has been a decline in the size of the manual working class and a sharp increase in the number and proportion of the professional, managerial, and technical groups. (Hamnett 2003: 334,335)

Society now is based in a service economy, increasing against industrial production. Even art has, from the beginning of this process, taken a major role in the transformation, where the production of culture involves all sorts of creative and visionary people. Such as Sharon Zukin stated back in the eighties, "with the arts now considered an industry, artists become the new industrialists, as important as any industrialists to the city's economic health and development" (Zukin 1989: 188) Not far from those dates, there was a slow birth of a new social class, which started to rise from the growing middle class, and whose income and concerns began to aim higher. Especially among twenty- and thirty-somethings (although nowadays is even younger) a new urban lifestyle popped up, in which the main "community" no longer is the family or the office, but "people are finding community in the real world: places where the streets feel alive at 2 AM and where a dynamic music scene, all-night

cafés, and extreme sports are easily accessible. People want to feel the energy that fuels creativity all around them” (Breen 2001).

According to Boschken, the US Bureau of the Census labelled the Upper Middle Class Genre the interwoven relation between the four Upper Middle Class (UMC) most important variables: Professional status, college education, high income, and income change (2003: 814). Using the more general term, New Middle Class (NMC) are the representatives of the New Culture, the creative and active urban dwellers which, as David Byrne describes, share a motto of a) aesthetic as commodity, b) artistic as lifestyle, and c) concretisation of culture in the built environment. This means that the NMC is concerned mainly with the visual culture of aesthetics, which is then represented in the urban landscape, but also with more meaningful ways of behaviour, such as the deeper interest in art, diversity, knowledge, and in one word, culture.

Images of the city of the NMC are taking over all cities in the globalised world. Their areas cover specially gentrified places in inner cities which are now new and vibrant with culture and life. Just like the white-collared-rolled-up-sleeves walking and eating at lunchtime at Bryant Park in sunny midday, and “because of the police and security guards, the design and the food, the park has become a visual and spatial representation of a middle-class public culture”. (Zukin 1995: 32) The NMC is represented by openness, for in itself it is never a homogeneous group: different ethnic groups, ages, places of origin, languages, tastes, looks, talents, etc. And as Herman Boschken describes, its “political culture promotes tolerance and generosity toward all classes and groups throughout the world.” But outside the NMC, it tends to forget about the rest of society, in its quest for obtaining its goals. The NMC is far from worrying about survival, because “unlike the ‘lower tier’s’ fear of the bill collector, poverty, child mortality, or insufficient health care and Social Security, those of the UMC genre are worried more about ‘falling short’ in the face of professional challenge, the enemies of planned orderliness, and assaults on personal integrity”. (Boschken 2003: 826)

The concern of ‘Falling short’ is not only an isolation from society, but it represents that the NMC is in desperate need of society itself working properly (in a community level as well as in world level), and it utterly depends upon social status (although, not as superficial as the higher classes). Still the NMC, “increasingly live [away] from the harsher physical reality under which much of the rest of the population endures. Sealing off the contradictory reality becomes as essential to the UMC lifestyle as pursuing abstract self-actualization itself.” (Boschken 2003: 826)

According to Sharon Zukin, the Bryant Park Restoration Corp. after reordering the park, “established a model of *pacification by cappuccino*” (1995: 28 emphasis added), promoting exclusiveness in public places without physically closing its doors to others. These “others” are represented by the rest of the population that have a lower status/income than the NMC. The fact of calling them “others” indicates the “fear of reducing the distance between ‘us’ and ‘them’, between security guards and criminals, between elites and ethnic groups, makes culture a crucial weapon in reasserting order”. (Zukin 1995: 46) There is a contradiction between inclusion and exclusion in what respects to the NMC, on one hand there is diversity in itself and on the other, it fears diversity that is not NMC.

Trapped in this process is the word “culture” which has suffered from a change in meaning from one generation to the other. If we ask our grandparents or parents, culture is that related to the educated, high (and classical) art which is created by the great masters throughout history, and is learnt and studied in order to grow in a life in society. There is a great gap between that concept of culture and the “new culture” defined by young people (including the new middle class) which has a more general connotation, referring not only to art but enveloping all aspects of life, this is, life becomes culture, or as Sharon Zukin puts it “*public culture* as socially constructed on the microlevel, it is produced by the many social encounters that make up daily life in the streets, shops and parks, the spaces in which we experience public life in cities.” (1995: 11 emphasis added) This marks a new link between culture and our activities in the city, which include mainly those related to our spare time and entertainment, with what we also call the “culture of shopping”, which is regularly practised in the capitalist cities. But not only has this affected the conception of culture, but it represents the economical, social and political changes in society, where “linking public culture to commercial cultures has important implications for social identity and social control” (Zukin 1995: 19). In this sense, culture has become more futile and manageable, specially by the private interest. Everyone from mobile phone companies to dentists, want people to purchase more frequently, so the life of objects we buy are becoming obsolete and replaceable much faster. If you bought a computer 8 years ago, it would last for 3 years until it was outdated, now it is maybe even less than a year. And this depends a lot on the creative process of the design, and the object that represents all aspects in a specific lifestyle (for example the NMC), where “the entrepreneurial edge of the economy shifted toward deal making and selling investments, and toward those creative products that could not easily be reproduced elsewhere. Product design [...] was said to show *economic genius*.” (Zukin 1995: 8 emphasis added) Buying a Mac has never been trendier: it not only represents having a nice good-working computer, but also a “lifestyle” that comes with the box. In the shift from a mass-consumption to a more advanced and complex consumption, art and design have been the major contributions to consumerism, when “art moved into a central position in the cultural symbolism of an increasingly materialistic world” (Zukin 1989: 82) Therefore, consumerism is not only concerned with the purchasing of goods, but has poisoned other aspects of life such as the creation of its aesthetics and even the new conception of what is culture. In other words, “consumer culture provides, like other cultural forms, the means by which social structure is mediated to and by individuals”, (Wynne and O’Connor 1997: 845) for the new culture is one of the main aspects that affect urban life. Current society and that of generations to come would not be conceivable without the culture in the streets of daily life.

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