Taste Formation in Pluralistic Societies

The Role of Rhetorics and Institutions

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abstract: Standard sociological theories of 'taste-as-refinement', which view taste as a means to maintain social distance among different social classes, conflict with taste-making practice in pluralistic societies where taste standards are no longer exclusively defined by a society's elite strata. To better account for the heterogeneity of tastemaking in modern societies, this article suggests a framework for analysis in which taste is considered as a collective interpretive activity that unfolds in distinct institutional contexts and is shaped by culturally available rhetorics of aesthetic judgment. Two conflicting but complementary rhetorics are identified: the rhetoric of refinement and the rhetoric of authenticity. Drawing on historical studies of taste, the role of institutional context for tastemaking is demonstrated. Taste in pluralistic society emerges in socially, politically and rhetorically contested institutional spaces where it is negotiated among a plurality of actors who have recourse to alternative rhetorics and classifications.

keywords: authenticity ♦ institutional effects ♦ refinement ♦ rhetorics of taste ♦ sociology of culture

Introduction

What are the mechanisms of taste formation in pluralistic societies? How do blue jeans become cocktail-party wear? Under which conditions will four-letter words become accepted usage in daytime television? When will a forlorn, apathetic look – what some have called 'heroin chic' – become *de rigueur* in perfume commercials? Who are the tastemakers? And who are the followers?

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Standard sociological accounts of taste (Veblen, 1970; Simmel, 1981; Bourdieu, 1984) are of limited use to decipher the confused canons of taste in pluralistic societies. The common denominator of these accounts is that taste follows a sequence of refinement→diffusion→devaluation→further refinement, as the tastemaking upper classes seek to maintain barriers to the lower classes by means of aesthetic outdistancing. Simmel (1981: 13) expressed the key tenet of what I shall call the refinement theory of taste:

As soon as the lower [strata] begin to appropriate the fashion, thereby transcending the boundaries set by the upper [strata] . . . the upper classes turn away from it and towards a new one, by means of which they once more distinguish themselves from the masses, and through which the game starts anew. (my translation)

In short, fashion 'is a product of class distinction' (Simmel, 1981: 12). According to the theory the mechanism of refinement→diffusion→devaluation→further refinement, becomes more, not less, important as class differences based on property and education weaken. Under such conditions, it has been said that taste operates as 'symbolic violence perpetrated on the weak by the strong' (Bourdieu, 1984: 165).

The refinement theory of taste formation encounters a number of difficulties. First, in the refinement theory taste follows – on either side of the social divide – class interest. The upper classes (or those with sufficient 'cultural' or 'symbolic' capital) use it to outdistance the lower ones. And the lower classes adopt upper-class standards in order to improve their status. In this way taste is entirely accounted for by strategic interest. It reduces to an arena of class struggle. What we observe empirically is often much more complex. As Colin Campbell (1995) has noted in a critique of Veblen, the strategic theory of taste formation attributes to the elite an omnipotence which is hard to conceptualize theoretically and difficult to verify empirically. In fact, taste standards often develop among the members of a social class as a byproduct of actions meant to satisfy and please members of one's own group, with no eye to the effect of one's actions on outsiders. Campbell, following Elster (1983), notes that these classes impress others and cause them to imitate their behavior precisely because *they do not care to impress*. Downward diffusion is an unintended consequence of their nonchalant unconcern with 'effect'.

Herbert Blumer (1969) was one of the first sociologists to call attention to the gaps in the theory. In a study of Parisian fashion decisions, he observed an informal 'collective selection' process in which those formally in charge were as much following the process of tastemaking as they were leading it. Blumer was surprised by how buyers in the Paris women's fashion industry converged independently on a small number of designs (under ten out of 100 presented). Refuting Simmel he noted: 'It is not the

prestige of the elite which makes the design fashionable but, instead, it is the suitability or potential fashionableness of the design which allows the prestige of the elite to be attached to it' (Blumer, 1969: 280). Where Simmel and others saw a one-sided process of imposition and imitation, Blumer observed something akin to a bilateral negotiation process, in this case between Parisian fashion designers and the buyers: 'The design has to correspond to the direction of the incipient taste of the fashion consuming public.'

If it is doubtful that tastemaking among the upper classes always follows a strategic calculus, the same holds for the behavior of the lower classes. If taste decisions among the lower classes are rational choices to better their social condition, why have they so often chosen a course of action so obviously self-defeating, as when working-class families follow the upper-class practice of setting aside extremely scarce living space for representational purposes for which the occasion arose only very infrequently (Rosenbaum, 1994)?

In light of contemporary developments in pluralistic societies the difficulties of the refinement theory seem even greater. According to this theory, the prevailing direction of taste formation is 'top-down'. A standard is defined at the top of the social hierarchy and diffuses downward. While this is indeed frequently the observable pattern of diffusion, it is by no means the only one. The reverse pattern – diffusion of a standard among members of the lower classes which then percolates upward – is a rival case that begs explanation. Music, dance and video are only some domains for which recent studies have established a disjuncture between socioeconomic status and aesthetic preference. Bryson (1996) has shown that – within certain limits – increasing education is associated with increasing tolerance for musical diversity. In another study of musical taste Peterson and Kern (1996) speak of a shift from 'snob to omnivore'. Such trends can also be found in other arenas of cultural production, suggesting a breakdown of the traditional divide between 'high' and 'popular' culture (Crane, 1992). Commenting on the diffusion of oversized jeans and other developments in dress style among American teenagers, the columnist William Raspberry (1994) noted: 'Upper-class kids used to set the dress styles that middle-class and lower-class kids would mimic', a trend that, according to Raspberry, can no longer be taken for granted. In a more general assessment of the state of middle-class culture, James Twitchell argues that these developments are not isolated exceptions: 'the center of gravity – the "norm" – in Western culture and world culture is dropping. . . . Where the elite threatened to exile the vulgar, now the vulgar threaten to exile the elite' (Twitchell, 1992: 23). Twitchell's diagnosis of an increasing 'vulgarization' of popular culture, for which he marshals much evidence, echoes Matthew Arnold's similar

lament more than 100 years ago (see Arnold, 1994). Later I find 'vulgarization' inappropriate to describe taste trends in pluralistic societies, but for now it suffices to point out that neither 'omnivorousness' nor 'vulgarization' describe developments that conform to a top-down diffusion process of taste formation or the segregation of 'high' vs 'popular culture' that was taken for granted only a few decades ago.

Given the obvious conflict between the two theses and the facts they reflect, recent writers have followed Blumer's collective selection approach to taste formation to reconcile elite and mass influences on taste. As Gerardo Ragone (1996: 314) put it, elite and mass taste are not 'alternative phenomena . . . but processes which are simultaneously present in societies, acting at different levels, with different characteristics'. Another way to put this is to say that taste formation in pluralistic societies no longer conforms to a single master mechanism. Neither top-down nor bottom-up diffusion realistically capture the diversity of trends of taste in pluralistic societies. Instead of being a product of a single grand master trend taste formation answers to different forces in different institutional and social contexts. It is essentially a *local* phenomenon. But, as I hope to show, 'local' does not mean arbitrary or anomic.

In this article I consider tastemaking as a collective cultural activity which takes place in the context of distinct institutional settings (Douglas, 1996). Two implications of this perspective are highlighted in this article. First, taste formation as a collective interpretation of a symbol or artifact which results in a collectively shared evaluation (as beautiful, cool, hip, tasty or ugly, awful, tasteless) requires a 'schema' or shared frame of reference (DiMaggio, 1997) to provide the classificatory technology that allows actors to negotiate the meaning of an as-yet-unclassified symbol (over-sized jeans, a musical style, a nouvelle cuisine dish, a hemline of a particular length). While in principle a variety of potentially relevant frames may be evoked ('pure-impure', 'clean-dirty', 'vulgar-refined', 'profane-sacred'), I believe that the historic discourse on taste in Western societies has produced *two* conflicting but complementary *basic* frames or rhetorics, which I will call the rhetoric of refinement and the rhetoric of authenticity. As I use it here, a *rhetoric* is a recognizable, coherent and relatively stable figure of thought and discourse which serves individuals as a shared frame of reference to negotiate the meaning of aesthetic symbols (see Hirschman, 1991 for an analysis of political rhetorics). Second, taste formation takes place within the context and constraints of social institutions. Blumer's Parisian *haute couture* and American retail design are institutional settings in which fashion standards of consumer groups are negotiated. Similarly, the aristocratic household and the bourgeois restaurant function as institutional settings to negotiate food taste. Public television and commercial television are another case in point. In each case,

different actors with different resources and different rhetorical dispositions are involved in shaping the tastemaking process.

The article is based on the assumption that many crucial shifts in tastemaking become apparent only if we consider them in an historical perspective. In this I follow the work of Norbert Elias (1994) whose pioneering studies of civilizing processes have illuminated historic shifts in collective manners and mores. But where Elias sees the change of manners as mainly driven by an endogenously increasing moral and aesthetic sensitivity (what he calls a 'rising threshold of shame and embarrassment'), I argue for the impact of institutional configurations as contextualizing factors of tastemaking. After a sketch of refinement and authenticity as two alternative rhetorics of taste, I provide some illustrations of the role of institutional change for the tastemaking process. On that basis I offer some concluding observations concerning taste formation in pluralistic societies.

Refinement and Authenticity: Aristocratic and Democratic Rhetorics of Taste

Social actors in modern societies can draw on a variety of rhetorics to define and legitimize taste standards. I distinguish the rhetoric of *refinement* and the rhetoric of *authenticity*. The former is the result of an essentially aristocratic configuration of power, the latter is articulated in the context of sweeping challenges of aristocratic privilege and symbolic practice. Because pluralistic societies inherit both rhetorics from their historic predecessors, a clear understanding of their origin and nature is important to understand contemporary tastemaking.

The Aristocratic Regime of Taste Formation

The rhetoric of refinement is a product of developments in 17th- and 18th-century Europe, when the ideas of 'taste' and 'civilization' occupied center stage in the discourse of aristocratic society. Civilization was conceived as a path from lower to higher levels of human perfection, while taste was seen as a process of individual refinement, including a distinction between low and high, coarse and delicate. Proper conduct, good (courtly) manners, discretion, decorum, good breeding – all this was the subject of a specialized literature which circulated among the members of Europe's court society. As ancient modes of conduct derived from the models of the warrior, the scholar, or the pious believer became less compelling, this literature, which included books like Castiglione's *Book of the Courtier* (1528), Gracian's *L'Homme de cour* (1647) or La Rochefoucauld's *Maximes et Reflexions* (1665), became the eagerly sought-after guides for good taste and proper behavior. Reflecting the opinions, anxieties and sentiments

prevailing at the courts at which they originated (the manuscripts were often circulated and discussed among its members before finally being published), the newly arrived printing press greatly accelerated their diffusion and provided them with greater authority. As a result, the sensibilities of an *Italian* courtier could become 'the accepted standard for *English* gentlemen', as Bull (1976: 13, my emphasis) says with reference to Castiglione's book.

In his study of the history of manners in Europe, Norbert Elias (1994) has given many examples how this process of aristocratic taste formation worked in practice. Tracing the gradual change in table manners and food preparation, as well as the control of bodily functions, Elias has shown how, in the course of two or three centuries, unrefined standards of behavior gave way to refined standards. Acting as tastemaker was

... a more or less limited courtly circle which first stamps the models only for the needs of its own social situation and in conformity with the psychological condition corresponding to it. But clearly the structure and development of French society as a whole gradually makes ever broader strata willing and anxious to adopt the models developed above them: they spread, also very gradually, throughout the whole of society, certainly not without undergoing some modification in the process. (Elias, 1994: 88)

Elias cites the case of Francois de Callières's (1694) book on 'good and bad manners of expression', which contained many model dialogues to demonstrate the rules of good speech. An example is the case of a young bourgeois, Mr Thibault, who has gained access to aristocratic circles, but whose language still 'reeks' of his bourgeois origins. For example, Thibault says '*déffunct* mon père, le pauvre *déffunct*' and is corrected that *déffunct* is not an expression 'which civility has introduced among well-spoken people. People of the world do not say that a man is deceased [*déffunct*] when they mean that he is dead' (Elias, 1994: 89). When pressed for reasons, the aristocratic hostess evokes *la délicatesse*: 'It is very possible that there are many well-bred people who are insufficiently familiar with the delicacy of our language ... a delicacy which is known to only a small number of well spoken people' (Elias, 1994: 91).

The downward diffusion of manners was not limited to manners of speech. In his study of French 'court society' Elias (1983: 101) points out that the financial bourgeoisie attempted to enter 'good society' by emulating the grand seigneurial nobility 'almost to a nuance'; witness the fact that their sons throw money out of the window as elegantly as the young nobles with whom they dine. Overall, Elias describes a classic case of 'top-down' taste formation, i.e. a social configuration in which power is vested in a small and highly cohesive elite, whose behavior and manners are taken by the less powerful and especially by the emerging middle class

as standard-setting. 'And from this mechanism – the development of courtly customs, their dissemination downward, their slight social deformation, their devaluation as marks of distinction – the constant movement in behavior patterns through the upper class receives part of its motivation' (Elias, 1994: 82).

Philosophical Elaboration of the Rhetoric of Refinement

The codification of courtly manners, which began with 16th- and 17th-century etiquette and advice literature written by courtiers, reached a high point during the 18th century when intellectual reflection on taste turned decidedly philosophical. Few of the protagonists of the Enlightenment missed a chance to pronounce on the subject. The result and obvious goal of this literature was to continue the mission of the courtier books with other means. Vis-a-vis a non-aristocratic audience which began to do its own reading and thinking, taste had to be defended as exclusive domain of an elite group of connoisseurs from which the common run of humankind was naturally or *de facto* excluded.

One example of this literature is Montesquieu's 'Essay on Taste', written for d'Alembert's *Encyclopédie*. In that essay, Montesquieu, whose *Esprit des lois* had advocated the idea of individual rights and republican government, does his best to defend the sphere of taste judgment as a prerogative of an exclusive elite. According to Montesquieu, the seat of taste is the soul, an autonomous faculty located between the sphere of emotions and that of ideas. This autonomy of the soul is evident in human curiosity, which is the soul's inclination to want to see the whole after it has seen a part. 'C'est donc le plaisir que nous donne un objet qui nous porte vers un autre' (Montesquieu, 1951: 1243). A great idea, for example, is a thing 'qui en fait voir une grande nombre d'autres' (Montesquieu, 1951: 1244). The autonomy of the soul is also evident in the fact that perceptions of taste are neither pure emotion nor pure ideas but rather the unity of both.

Because taste stands autonomously between experience and thought, taste judgments follow their own laws. We may observe that order, variety, symmetry, contrast, surprise and grace please the soul and from there draw inferences concerning the nature of this organ. The fact that the soul is especially delighted by grace is also a good example that taste ultimately cannot be acquired. To be graceful, one needs to be naive. But how could one work on being naive (Montesquieu, 1951: 1255)? The fact that a state which pleases the soul cannot be willed is an example that perceptions and judgments of taste are – ultimately – independent of experience. This, in turn, shows that taste cannot be acquired, but must be the reserve of a class of people equipped with 'natural taste'. Hence the distinction between people of taste and common people. While

according to Montesquieu coarse people experience only one sensation, people with taste exhibit delicacy, i.e. the ability to distinguish complex characteristics where others only see one.

Montesquieu's argument is typical for a key tenet of the 18th-century philosophical literature on taste: that ordinary men and women are unable to reliably distinguish good and bad, ugly and beautiful. As Daniel Cottom (1981) has shown, many other 18th-century authors on taste rely on very similar arguments. Much of this literature is driven by an attempt to reconcile the factual observation that taste judgments are subjective and idiosyncratic with the philosophical commitment to universal, intersubjective beauty. To defend the idea of beauty as universal and beyond subjective dispute these authors tended to argue that any actual discord over the beauty of a certain object must be the result of an 'apparent defect or imperfection in the organ' of perception as David Hume (1882: 271), another Enlightenment advocate who defended elite taste, put it. Hume invented the figure of the expert critic, the 'man of taste', who occupies the province of refined taste owing to the delicacy, cultivation and unprejudiced nature of his mind. To these men whose faculties are undistorted, taste judgments are unequivocal:

Whoever would assert an equality of genius and elegance between Ogilby and Milton, or Bunyan and Addison, would be thought to defend no less an extravagance, than if he had maintained a mole-hill to be as high as Teneriffe, or a pond as extensive as the ocean. (Hume, 1882: 269)

In sum: taste was the province of an autonomous, universal, disinterested and exclusive judgment: 'The man of taste was an aristocrat in spirit if not by race, and the judgment of taste was aristocratic rather than democratic, for it was not founded upon the likes and dislikes of a majority' (Saisselin, quoted in Cottom, 1981: 367). It is this intimate association of taste with the practice and mentality of an exclusive aristocratic class that was increasingly questioned as the political and social role of this class was challenged throughout Europe. The spokesperson of that challenge and the fountainhead of a radically different rhetoric of taste was Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

Authenticity: Rousseau's Anti-Aristocratic Rhetoric of Taste

Not surprisingly, the main attack on the rhetoric of refinement came from the author of the *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences*, who began his career by announcing to the world that the refinements of the arts and the sciences were really corruptions of human nature (see Rousseau, 1974: 209):

Now that more subtle refinements and more delicate taste have reduced the art of pleasing to a set of rules, there is a base and deceptive uniformity in our

behavior, and minds seem to have been cast in the same mold. Politeness and propriety make incessant demands on us; we always follow social usage, never our personal inclinations. We no longer dare to appear to be what we are.

Under Rousseau's attack, the pillars of aristocratic taste are deciphered as false artifices, distorting man's natural simplicity and goodness. Against the aristocratic emphasis on form and mannerism, Rousseau insists on the importance of sentiment and feeling. Refinement alienates man from himself, progressively more so, the more civilization advances: 'our souls have been corrupted in proportion as our sciences and arts have advanced toward perfection' (Rousseau, 1974: 210). Delicacy and gallantry, these symbols of refinement, can be practiced only at the expense of natural virtue and beauty. 'Tell us', Rousseau challenges his rival Voltaire, 'how many strong and manly beauties have you sacrificed to our false delicacy, and how many great things the spirit of gallantry . . . has cost you' (Rousseau, 1974: 219).

Rousseau's views on taste are more systematically elaborated in *Emile*, where he defines taste as 'the faculty of judging what pleases or displeases the greatest number' (Rousseau, 1979: 340). In diametrical opposition to the aristocratic canon, Rousseau sees 'Everyman' endowed with the ability to render taste judgments. If the multitude does not always judge correctly, it is because a gap between true taste and the preferences of the many may emerge under certain social conditions. Only in societies 'where inequalities are not too great' and where 'the tyranny of opinion is limited and where voluptuousness [used here as sensuality] reigns more than vanity does' can the many develop good taste, for in the opposite case 'fashion stifles taste, and people no longer seek what pleases them but seek rather *what distinguishes them*' (Rousseau, 1979: 340, my emphasis). Rousseau continues to sketch the *mechanism of alienated taste formation*, precisely the one that most writers on taste before and after him have come to consider the normal one:

In this latter case [of great social inequality and tyranny of opinion] it is no longer true that good taste is that of the greatest number. Why is that? Because the object of taste changes. Then the multitude no longer has judgment of its own. It now judges only according to the views of those whom it believes more enlightened than itself. (Rousseau, 1979: 340)

The result is a state of society where people are guided by the search for distinction rather than true pleasure. Now tastes are systematically distorted. Whereas in its undistorted state people find the models of taste in nature, under conditions of inequality taste standards are found in 'what pleases those who lead us' (Rousseau, 1979: 341). Antedating Veblen by almost 200 years, Rousseau proceeds to articulate the original version of the 'conspicuous consumption' hypothesis:

Those who lead us are the artists, the nobles, and the rich, and what leads them is their interest or their vanity. The rich, in order to display their wealth, and the artists, in order to take advantage of that wealth, vie in the quest for new means of expense. This is the basis on which great luxury establishes its empire and leads people to love what is difficult and costly. Then what is claimed to be beautiful, far from imitating nature, is beautiful only by dint of thwarting it. This is how luxury and bad taste become inseparable. Wherever taste is expensive, it is false. (Rousseau, 1979: 341)

Rousseau opposes the aristocratic rhetoric and practice of refinement with a new rhetoric of authenticity. Taste that finds its model in nature is necessarily inclusive rather than exclusive. 'Exclusive pleasures are the death of pleasure' (Rousseau, 1979: 354). To rely on domestic servants, for example, is conceited and counterproductive: 'I have a hundred times thought that with my glass beside me at the table, I drink at the instant I please; whereas if I dined in grand style, twenty voices would have to repeat "Drink" before I could quench my thirst' (Rousseau, 1979: 346). And where the defenders of refinement insisted on disinterestedness and leisure as prerequisites of good taste, for Rousseau the need to work for a living was no obstacle to good taste. Unlike the nobility who seek ever greater refinements out of boredom, good taste comes naturally to those who are engaged in honest labor. 'Gaiety, rustic labors, and frolicsome games are the premier chefs of the world, and delicate ragouts are quite ridiculous to people who have been breathless since sunrise' (Rousseau, 1979: 352).

By basing his discourse on the idea of natural man (who, however, is corruptible by civilization), Rousseau arrives at a rhetoric of taste that differs radically from the ideology developed by earlier writers. Among the tradition-forming authors, Rousseau is the first to challenge the aristocratic monopoly on taste by arguing that 'true taste' is natural and accessible to all men, not just an exclusive few, that its object is the pleasure of the greatest number, not whimsical distinctions arrived at by connoisseurs and that delicacy and refinement are corruptions rather than articulations of good taste. Because these are precisely the notions that have animated contemporary sociological critiques of taste as a means for social distinction and exclusion, it seems useful to remember that the key concepts for this attack were developed by one of the most effective and influential critics of aristocratic power more than two centuries ago. As the non-aristocratic and working classes move for voice and place in civil society, they also begin to reject notions that beauty and goodness can only be defined by men of birth and leisure. Not surprisingly, they find their spokesperson in Rousseau.

Refinement and Authenticity in Institutional Context

Rousseau redefines the social contract on taste, or, more correctly, he provides the intellectual ammunition for such a redefinition. Where the exclusive 'man of taste' reigned, he installs the common man as arbiter of taste. After Rousseau, taste is no longer the uncontested province of an exclusive few, but of all men. Unlike Montesquieu or Hume who were ready to entertain equality as a principle of politics, but insisted on aristocratic dominance in culture, Rousseau extends the idea of equality to that last vestige of aristocracy. After him the deeply entrenched rhetoric of refinement has a powerful rival.

Authenticity can be evoked whenever the practice of taste as refinement leads to a defense of exclusive privilege or the creation of aesthetic monstrosities. This it sooner or later must do, since refinement can be improved only by further refinement. 'The logical consequence of manners and mores continuously descending down the social ladder is a static situation' (Gronow, 1993: 284), or esthetic paralysis, to put it a little more strongly. With his reinstatement of the common man as a man of taste, Rousseau supplies the ideological key for a critique of excessive refinement. Whenever an esthetic practice threatens to veer off into artifice and worse, it can be deflated in the name of authenticity. Yet, like refinement, authenticity, too, describes a self-eroding development whose limiting case is a paralyzing loss of all distance. As Simmel has argued, even the most intimate social relations depend for their maintenance on a minimal degree of social distance (Simmel, 1950: 321). As distance recedes as a result of the demand for authenticity, it invites a critique of authenticity in the name of refinement.

Given the conflicting and complementary relationship of the rhetorics of refinement and authenticity, collectively accepted and stable taste judgments require institutional context. In and of themselves a hemline of a particular length or a musical style are neither here nor there. How a given symbol is defined is a matter of the institutions in which the tastemaking takes place. Different institutional settings represent different power balances among collective actors who, in turn, are likely to favor different takes on the refinement/authenticity continuum. The following are a few examples of how institutional settings may affect the power balance among collective actors and, with it, the dominant taste canon.

Music: Shift in Power Balance between Artist and Audience

In a short essay on Mozart, Norbert Elias (1993) discusses changes in the institutional setting which bear on the relation between composer/

musician and audience. Between the social settings in which artists like Handel, Haydn and Mozart worked and those encountered by Beethoven, Elias observes a crucial shift that marks a new balance of power between artist and audience. For the first time, the aristocratic canons of taste, represented by aristocratic sponsors of *Handwerkskunst* (craft-art), which were so influential in Mozart's period, no longer determine the conditions of the artist's work:

In the craft-art period the taste canon of the sponsors prevails as the frame of reference over an artist's individual artistic phantasy. The artist's imagination is strictly channeled by the taste canons of the established stratum of sponsors. During the stage of the artists'-art the artists are on a par with the art-loving and art-buying public. The top cadre of artists has even more power as arbiters of taste and pioneers of art than their audience. By virtue of innovative models of art they can steer the established canons in new directions, and the audience may gradually learn to see with their eyes and listen with their ears. (Elias, 1993: 61, my translation)

The change from craft-art to artists'-art represents a crucial change in the institutional conditions of tastemaking, as it shifts the locus of tastemaking from sponsors to artists and liberates them from the sponsors' canon of refinement. It is no longer the aristocratic patron who wants to distinguish her- or himself and their 'house' by the complex skills of the artisan maker of music, art or furniture in their employ, but the artisan-turned-artist and their new-found audience that become tone setters. This involves a shift from external control of artistic expression to self-control: artists in the post-aristocratic age derive their inspiration not from the taste standards of an aristocratic patron; instead they engage in 'self-consultation' and probe their own artistic conscience (Elias, 1993: 65). As a result of their emancipation from aristocratic patronage 'the artist makes the audience', to use Daniel Bell's (1976: 38) phrase. Art and culture are freed from preconceived, external standards in favor of the search for 'authentic' experience by an 'authentic self'. This powerful push toward individuation is not limited to artists. Their audiences, too, respond as individuals whose taste standards recognize no other authority than their own feelings and experiences. In short, while the institutional setting of the aristocratic court represents a power balance between the sponsors and the makers of music that is very much tilted in favor of the former, the emerging institution of a commercial market for music, sustained by concert subscriptions and, later, the sale of sheets, alters the power balance – and with it the taste canons – in favor of the latter.

Theater and Literature

De Tocqueville's discussion of the arts under aristocratic and democratic conditions provides another example for the impact of institutional

context on tastemaking. In aristocracies, he says, literary tastes are refined, learned, highly polished and profound. Yet, preoccupied as they are with themselves, aristocratic writers are in danger of losing sight of the rest of the world 'and that will make their work farfetched and sham. They will impose petty literary rules for their exclusive use, and that will gradually make them lose first common sense and then contact with nature' (de Tocqueville, 1969: 472). In democracies, by contrast, art is irregular and heterogeneous, but also vigorous, vivid and full of lifelike emotion. Moreover, democracies are social arenas in which aristocratic and democratic influences can beneficially interact – an interaction which can be observed, according to de Tocqueville (1969: 489), most readily in the theater, the stage having always been the cultural medium most accessible to the masses:

... even in aristocracies the drama represents the most democratic side of literature. The crowd can enjoy sights on the stage more easily than any other form of literature. No preparation and no study are needed to take them in. . . . When the yet untutored love of the pleasure of the mind begins to affect any class of the community, it is to the latter that they turn. Even in aristocratic societies the theaters have always been full of spectators who were not aristocrats. Only in the theater have the upper classes mingled with the middle and lower classes. . . . It has always been in the theater that the learned and the educated have had the greatest difficulty in making their tastes prevail over that of the people and preventing themselves from being carried away by them. The pit often lays down the law for the boxes.

Lawrence Levine's (1988) *Highbrow, Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* can be read as an excellent case study of this interaction between 'popular taste' and 'elite taste' in democratic America. For much of the 19th century, Levine argues, the barrier between popular taste and good taste was very low, and the two were often nearly undistinguishable. Up to the mid-19th century, Shakespeare was a popular author in America whose plays were read, seen and performed by and for popular audiences everywhere in the country. *Richard III*, *Othello*, *Macbeth*, *Hamlet* and many other plays were performed in big theaters in New York just as they were on makeshift stages in miners' towns and villages. Beginning in mid-century, however, signs of cultural segregation and differentiation of audiences along socioeconomic lines were gradually emerging, and theaters began to cater to one type of audience to the exclusion of others. The motor behind this emerging divide was increasing socioeconomic inequalities, as the old aristocratic and the newly monied classes tried to distinguish themselves and their cultural entertainment from that of the masses by offering more 'refined' cultural fare and charging higher prices. On one occasion, when two Shakespeare performances – one held in the old popular style and one in the more refined one – were given on

the same day (7 May 1849) the elite-oriented performance was drowned in 'an avalanche of eggs, apples, potatoes, lemons, and, ultimately, chairs' (Levine, 1988: 66). A correspondent for the *New York Herald* called the riots a protest against 'aristocratizing the pit' (Levine, 1988: 66). Yet, if the riots at Astor Place represented the fight between popular and elite taste in arts and culture, the attempts to sacralize culture, to go 'highbrow' and to turn culture into a prerogative of the cognoscenti 'never became a cultural reality' (Levine, 1988: 167). Unlike their aristocratic counterparts in Europe, who controlled the economic, political and social levers of power and whose practice of cultural exclusivity was legitimized by a long-established rhetoric of refinement, the American guardians of high culture never succeeded in re-establishing the old aristocratic monopoly over matters of taste and culture. While political confrontations like the Astor Place riots soon waned, the cultural energy which found expression in new forms of literature, music, poetry, drama, which cut across the old 'high vs low', did not.

The lasting success of popular culture is perhaps most visible in the literature that was increasingly available by means of the mass-circulation novel. When *Huckleberry Finn* was published in 1884 it was damned by the apostles of high culture as rough and coarse, a book suited to the 'slums' (Mailer, 1984). In the days before there were mass markets for fiction, the predictably irate reaction of the high-culture establishment might well have killed the book. But the mechanical printing press had made literature a mass institution, which meant that *Huckleberry Finn* was available to a mass audience so that every reader could judge for him- or herself. As a result Ernest Hemingway could write on the 50th anniversary of the book: 'All modern literature comes from one book by Mark Twain called *Huckleberry Finn*. . . . There was nothing before, there has been nothing as good since', a judgment quoted and upheld on the book's 100th anniversary by Norman Mailer (1984). But whatever its literary merits, the cultural appeal of the novel cannot be explained without taking account of the fact that the hero of Twain's book is one of the most Rousseau-esque figures in all of modern literature. Beginning on the first and ending on the last page, Huck Finn announces his unwavering determination not be 'civilized'. To refined manners Huck Finn prefers the vigors of the outdoors. Like Rousseau's Emile, Huck seeks adventure and learning in nature, instead of books. Huck Finn's judgments come from the heart, not the head. He befriends Jim, the runaway slave. Because he judges Jim by his behavior rather than his skin color, Huck refuses to reveal Jim's hideout. The story ends when Jim is free and Huck swears to continue to resist the blessings of civilization. His last word and the novel's concluding sentence: 'But I reckon I got to light out for the Territory ahead of the rest, because Aunt Sally she's going to adopt me and

sivilize me and I can't stand it. I been there before' (Twain, 1983: 309). Juxtaposed to the 'sivilized' people who find their refinement perfectly consistent with their acceptance of slavery, Twain creates a simple hero who shuns all refinement and makes the right moral choice by consulting the voice of his conscience rather than the customs and mores of the day. Among the many literary descendants of Huckleberry Finn, J.D. Salinger's single-minded warrior against 'phoniness', Holden Caulfield (*Catcher in the Rye*) deserves special mention.

Negotiating Food Taste

Concerning the development of food taste, Stephen Mennell's study, *All Manners of Food* (1988), provides rich detail on the role of changing institutional conditions from aristocratic courts to the modern restaurant as the main venue for the negotiation of food taste. At the end of the middle ages 'the aristocratic courts had in cooking as in many other domains a culturally leading function' (Mennell, 1988: 92). Hume's 'man of taste' or Montesquieu's 'délicatesse' are well and alive in the definition of culinary standards in this period of European civilization. Mennell quotes an English author who defines the characteristics of the 'true epicurean' in a way that echoes Hume's definition of the 'man of taste'. The epicurean can be recognized by the

... fine distinction of his tongue, profound knowledge of the rules of the art of cooking of all renown schools, an enlightened judgment concerning their respective advantages, a judgment which he has relentlessly refined and brought to maturation through long experience. (Mennell, 1988: 59)

The emergence of master cooks in France represents an important step in the development of food taste in Europe. Famous chefs like Carême and Escoffier are essential in systematizing and codifying the *haute cuisine* canon. On the other hand, theirs is not simply a role of bringing the era of great aristocratic cuisine to its glamorous apex. They operate in a new institutional context – it is no longer the aristocratic family and court society, but the restaurant. Instead of cooks who assumed an important, but socially subordinate role in the aristocratic household, the growing number of restaurants that compete for recognition provides a stage on which the star of a master chef can shine. But with this greater independence from aristocratic patronage the master cook enters into a new relation with the patrons of the restaurant. While the master cook systematizes and elaborates the aristocratic culinary canon, he or she also ushers in an innovation in the institutional context of good eating. Dependent on effectively satisfying the audience of restaurant clients instead of a limited and exclusive circle of court members, the master cook enters into a *de facto* dialogue with the customer-clients. But, unlike the large

aristocratic family, many middle-class families who frequent restaurants cook themselves. Apart from good taste, the middle-class household emphasizes nutrition, economy, time saving and convenience. As Gusfield (1992) has shown in a more recent study, health came to be associated with unrefined foods by large sectors of the middle class, especially as a result of the natural foods movement pioneered by Graham and Kellogg (Gusfield, 1992: 82) which opposed 'the destructive effect of modern "refinements" on food, morality, and health'.

The greater role of the middle class with its different set of priorities has noticeable practical and ideological ramifications on food taste. Expert food critics now take an increasingly critical attitude toward luxury and superfluous refinement. Traditionally, their task was to articulate and maintain the *haute cuisine* standard, while now their writing is directed to an audience that prefers simplicity to luxury, authentic taste and natural foods to artificial refinement. In this way restaurant guides and the growing genre of food magazines accelerate the democratization of the standards of food taste. Market forces further hasten this development. As businesses that depend on economic viability, restaurants must take care not to offend the taste of important segments of their customers. Numbers count, and middle-class diners and their tastes increasingly become the reference point for food critics, chefs and owners alike. Elite pretensions come under fire, as in this quote by an influential food critic who wrote in 1936:

We protested repeatedly against the ultimative decrees, which issue from certain gastronomical societies claiming a leading role in the culinary culture. We should not forget, that according to our persuasion gastronomy is a free country, where everyone can follow his inclinations as long as he doesn't interfere with his fellow men [*sic*]. (Mennell, 1988: 350)

Mennell summarizes with an eye on the historic development of food taste: 'the established groups could not maintain their culinary exclusivity' (Mennell, 1988: 420).

Commercial Television

Institutions such as the urban symphony orchestra, the theater, the mass circulation novel, or the restaurant are social settings which greatly alter the conditions for the negotiation of taste standards. Some of the effects that institutions have on taste can be captured by such classical sociological variables as socioeconomic position, education, power, aesthetic competence. Thus, the outcome of the collective negotiation will depend in part on which collective actors (sponsors, artists/creators, audiences, experts/critics) are represented in the institution, their socioeconomic position and relative power, the rhetorics they draw on and the given

level of taste standards. The degree of audience organization and cohesion often plays a role. Atomized audiences who vote with their feet in mass markets (e.g. buyers of music CDs) may well be more open to innovation than highly organized and cohesive audiences (say, jazz club audiences), and more subject to peer pressure and expert taste. On the other hand, below certain threshold values, it may also be considerably more difficult to sway mass audiences to entertain new styles. Audiences and artists may be usefully distinguished by their degree of social exclusion/inclusion or their degree of independence from sponsors and/or critics. The role of critics in the tastemaking process depends on their degree of independence (e.g. from state, church or corporate authority), their degree of public influence, prestige and their social and intellectual diversity (do they all share the same educational background?). Sponsors may be private individuals such as independently wealthy patrons or board members of foundations set up by them; they may also be publicly accountable representatives like government officials who are involved in television programming or political commissars who set fashion standards – as in Mao's China (Kunz, 1996).

But there is little hope that any reliable prediction of tastemaking will emerge from tight models that can be built on such classical sociological variables alone. Idiosyncratic factors unique to a given case will always play a powerful role, for much rides on the particularities of each case and the characteristics of each institutional medium. This is clear when we consider, as a final example, how commercial television as an institution has impacted the tastemaking process. Even though television is increasingly cited as a major factor in altering social dynamics in contemporary societies (Postman, 1985; Twitchell, 1992; Putnam, 1995; Bok, 1998), the impact of television as an institution of taste formation still awaits systematic study. Similarly to the historical examples cited earlier, such a study would have to compare the social groups that this institution propels to influence, discern their interests and motives and compare them to the tastemakers of previous or alternative media of communication such as print. Such a project obviously exceeds my limits here, but a thumbnail sketch may usefully extent the implications of my main thesis for this contemporary example.

Commercial television is a relatively recent factor in the tastemaking process, yet there are grounds to believe that it has dramatically altered many parameters of tastemaking. For large segments of the population, especially the children of families in which work or career absorb the bulk of parental time, television has marginalized and even replaced the conversations carried by print and family. Where newspaper publishers are constrained by their dependence on public respectability and family members are constrained by their affective-emotional ties, the sponsors

of televised images are agents of self-governing markets and thus able to seek modes of conversation with high attention value within much wider margins of respectability. Where the sponsors of operas tended (and tend) to be motivated by love of the art or conspicuous consumption, the key interest of the sponsors of the aptly named soap opera is to sell soap. Fortunately for the latter, the 'word from the sponsor' in television is much less readily ignored and competes more effectively with the non-commercial parts of the program than its equivalent in print media.

In addition, the characteristics of television as a medium of mass communication arguably bias the conversation it carries in favor of entertainment and against rational discourse (Postman, 1985). Books and newspapers require a certain level of education and maturity on the part of their audience and a certain level of distance on the part of the presenter. By contrast, the prerequisites for gainful consumption of audiovisual images are much less complex. In this sense it may be said that television has emancipated the consumer of culture from some of the requirements of cognitive competence and emotional and moral maturity.

The shift from government-controlled television to commercial television exacerbates these trends for a simple but compelling reason. The viewing decisions made by a person who is charged to act as a representative of a community will typically differ markedly from the decisions made by the same person acting in private only on his or her own behalf. Most people will be more conservative and conventional in their tastes if they have to make or defend them publicly. Political thinkers like John Stuart Mill were persuaded that 'if all action has to be defended publicly only the higher motives would be appealed to as reasons for action' (in Goodin, 1996: 42). As Goodin (1996: 42) points out, Mill was so convinced of the benevolent effect of this institutional feature that he recommended open voting rather than the secret ballot. Thus, the explosion of channels and programming options ushered by ratings-controlled commercial television has privatized large segments of the public square by shifting the programming decisions from public representatives, acting on behalf of particular communities, to private individuals acting only on behalf of themselves. And because increasingly younger audiences directly or indirectly control rapidly growing portions of buying power for televisable merchandise, program sponsors increasingly seek to adjust their broadcasts to the taste of adolescents and pre-adolescents (Walsh, 1995). Nor can this be without far-reaching consequences for prevailing taste standards. Not only is the moral maturation of this age group incomplete, but also the natural inclination of pre-adolescent and adolescent children and youth to distance themselves from the world of their elders whose shoes they will eventually fill is an easily exploited target by commerce-minded programmers eager to attract

their attention (Leonhard and Kerwin, 1997). A culture in which ten-year-olds have a significant say over the kinds of music, stories, dress, food and other artifacts that are culturally consumed will naturally look different from one in which only adults have a voice in the tastemaking process. In this manner commercial television arguably empowers increasingly younger, morally immature audiences to be nationally influential arbiters of taste. Commercial television is an institution that installs pre-adolescents as arbiters of taste in proportion as it invests them with buying power. If the theater was an institution in which the pit laid down the law for the boxes, commercial television is an institution in which, increasingly, adolescents and even children are laying down the law for adults. As the family and other institutions of traditional socialization weaken or strain under the pressure of market and cultural forces, television stands at the ready to fill the gap.

The Pluralization of Taste

I argue in this article that taste is negotiated by collective actors in a matrix of rhetorics and institutions. Another way to put it is to say that tastemaking is a *local* process, heavily influenced by the operating institutional context and the available rhetorics and classifications. As I have tried to show previously, the local nature of tastemaking can be best understood in a historical-comparative framework. While this view of taste as a quilt whose creation involves diverse actors and audiences with equally diverse agendas is consistent with a recent shift to 'local' and historical studies and away from the concern with universally valid master mechanisms of taste formation (e.g. Levine, 1988; Elias, 1983, 1993, 1994; DiMaggio, 1992), I believe that the role of rhetorics has not been sufficiently appreciated in previous research on taste.

In the tastemaking process rhetorics are comparable to metaphors. They are typically not *what we see* but rather *what we see with* (Quinn and Holland, 1987: 14). By selectively directing attention to certain features of an aesthetic symbol, they organize and structure reality. For this reason rhetorics matter. Simply put, different rhetorics ('pure-impure', 'clean-dirty', 'vulgar-refined', 'profane-sacred') produce different taste judgments. The rhetorics that come to be culturally dominant influence tastemaking by steering the collective imagination and interpretation of new symbols one way or another.

Pluralistic societies (societies which are politically democratic and culturally decentralized, i.e. without a recognizable cultural center) inherit *two* rhetorics of classifying aesthetic symbols from their historic predecessors. Significantly, authenticity is not merely the opposite of refinement, but represents a metaphorical revolution by introducing a new

standard of evaluation. Authenticity explodes a tight and ideologically closed standard of 'refined-vulgar'. Whereas before the invention of 'authenticity' the unrefined was equated with vulgar and thus became a matter for contempt, it may now be labeled positively. (Because they ignore this essential innovation and defend the traditional 'refined-vulgar' dichotomy, theories of taste like Matthew Arnold's are, in a strict sense, reactionary.) In this way, the rhetoric of authenticity undermines the hegemonic nature of taste, for as soon as an alternative standard is available, a group or class can no longer outclass another by handing out low marks on the scale of refinement. Non-refinement can now be defined positively, as 'natural', sincere, authentic, etc. A further advantage of this view is that individuals can be treated as active agents of tastemaking who operate within certain institutional constraints, rather than as passive objects of a 'class structure that is internalized in individuals and determines cultural choices that reproduce that class structure' as Gartman (1991: 422) noted in a critique of Bourdieu.

When tastemakers have access to two conflicting, but complementary, classificatory schemata, it not only enriches the process of judging and creating aesthetic artifacts, but it also makes it very unlikely that the (socioeconomically) lower classes are ever as passive and overwhelmed by the aesthetic practice of the upper classes as some studies have portrayed them. While many sociological studies of taste have treated their subject as if refinement were the only available rhetoric, I argue that no such *a priori* assumptions are warranted. Instead, I suggest that it is necessary to consider the operating institutional context, the balance of power among participating collective actors, and their selective use of the available legitimating rhetorics to understand which group of actors holds the greatest leverage to act as arbiters of taste in a given case. Just as de Tocqueville's theater altered the power balance of tastemaking actors in favor of the plebeian masses (compared to written literature which could be consumed only by an educated elite), so other institutions represent distinct power balances among specific actors who are likely to subscribe to specific rhetorics and classifications in the tastemaking process.

National context is also likely to be of great importance. In the examples given above, the rhetoric of authenticity appears much more strongly rooted in the USA than in France – the latter has a long tradition of taste-as-refinement sedimented in aristocratically dominated institutions, and the former has a middle class that has always been more receptive to an anti-aristocratic, anti-refinement rhetoric and has actively fought for institutions that reflect those sentiments. Educational, political and cultural institutions serve to preserve and transmit such cultural preferences from a past age to the present and may explain persistent differences of cultural practice.

Finally, I would like to suggest that contemporary tastemaking is

pluralistic not only by virtue of being shaped by a plurality of diverse institutions, but also because individuals themselves increasingly exhibit a taste for a plurality of styles and genres. Something along these lines was suggested in 1932 by the French pianist Stepan Mougín when he commented on what was then called ‘the jazz controversy’:

It takes tolerance and willingness to accept these new art forms. One must forget all that one’s previous artistic education has taught one. The mind must be like fresh wax, ready to receive these new impressions. Otherwise, your entire being, everything you are accustomed to and have learned to like, will be shaken and even wounded – nevertheless, there is no reason why you should renounce classical music; it is simply necessary that you take along with classical music an entirely different set of emotions, those belonging to jazz. (quoted in Leonard, 1962: 157)

The erosion of traditional boundaries of taste that occupies the attention of much contemporary research may well be an indication that Mougín’s call for increased tolerance for aesthetic dissonance, for a greater flexibility to move between styles and idioms, and to go beyond a single canon is increasingly descriptive of taste in pluralistic societies. Perhaps what we are witnessing is the result of the cultural learning that pluralistic societies afford their members, something akin to the chance that increased intercultural contact implies for learning about the diversity and complexity of cultures without the requirement to renounce one’s commitment to one’s native culture.

As I have tried to show, for all its apparent incoherence and disorder, this sort of pluralization of taste can be accounted for in a framework of institutional and rhetorical variation. At any rate, we have no reason to throw up our hands and declare the ‘obsolescence of taste’, as some have argued (e.g. Rollin, 1994). What is true, however, is that taste is no longer fully dominated by the strategic calculus of class interest. If refinement has historically been a weapon of the elite to outclass and exclude the masses, and if authenticity has historically been a weapon of the marginalized and excluded to make their way into ‘good society’, under pluralistic conditions both rhetorics are available to tastemakers largely independent of their socioeconomic position. Today, the upper classes are as likely to vie for ‘authenticity’ in dress, musical style or food as are the lower classes. Styles and genres are weakening as indicators of class or socioeconomic position because individuals in pluralistic societies are no longer prisoners of taste.

Note

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