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Standards of taste and varieties of goodness: the (un)predictability of modern consumption

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Introduction

Very broadly speaking, there are three alternative understandings of the relationship between an object and its individual user. First, the value of an object is inherent to that object's use in its capacity for satisfying its user's needs or functions. Second, value is based on the individual's subjective evaluation of the object in question, regarding its utility, capacity to give pleasure, etc. The third, culturalist, alternative is to understand the value of an object in terms of the cultural meaning assigned to it and shared by the members of a community. It is thus determined by its place in a common cultural system of classification and codification. What is common to the three alternatives is that there is in them, in fact, no place for any genuine disagreement about matters of taste. They all seem to exemplify the old maxim according to which *de gustibus disputandum non est*. Whether it depends on subjective preferences or on some inherent objective characteristics, the relative worth – or quality – of objects is not open to argumentation or any social mediation. The third alternative, in its turn, leads to cultural relativism. Within any one culture the relative value and worth of objects is taken for granted but they are not open to revaluation or critical argumentation by the members of any other cultures. In order to better understand the relation between objects and their users one has to work out the relation between the individual and the social. With the help of a conceptual framework that makes it possible at the same time to understand how one can be both a unique individual and a part of a social whole, how to have an individual taste and to share it with others, it is possible to speak of (semi-)objective aesthetic standards which, however, are not stable but, in principle, open to negotiation and therefore in a state of constant change.

Following the Simmelian idea of a modern society consisting of a multitude of social circles, the social world perspective offers an opportunity to analyse the emergence and functioning of diverse and independent socially shared aesthetic standards and etiquettes. It also explains how even those who do not necessarily share the same taste can, at least to some degree, sensibly appreciate and even criticise each other's performances and choices.

Our modern society is not a mass society; neither is it a totally individualised society, nor a society consisting of several, totally separate, cultural enclaves. There are some aesthetic standards of excellence and goodness that can be mobilised in analysing and evaluating the formation of the demand for consumer goods and services. They do not tell us what the next novelties will be, but they do tell us that to be successful any novelties will be embedded in complex social practices and rules.

In our modern food culture there are at least some such relatively well-known and clear-cut aesthetic standards and etiquettes of taste to which some particular consumer goods or product groups belong and from which they derive their special worth and value. An almost classic example is the classification of wines according to a very complex taste system, corresponding in part to their origin and cultivation. Without doubt, to many people wines are more-or-less irrelevant as objects of consumption or appreciation, and there are people who might have a totally different relation to wine appreciation, their interest extending no further than, say, a wine's alcoholic content or presumed health effects. But, just as in the case of art, the classic example of social worlds (see Becker 1982), this does not exhaust the cultural and social importance of the social world(s) of wine lovers for the marketing and consumption of wines. As will be shown, the importance of such restricted social worlds to the wider world of mass consumption depends on the degree to which such social worlds are open to 'casual visitors' and welcome tourists.

In cow-milk drinking countries over the last thirty years, one remarkable development in consumption has been the extremely rapid diversification of milk products and the subsequent segmentation of the market. From a very standardised bulk product – consisting basically of only three products: milk, sour milk and cream – hundreds of new milk products have emerged, all neatly packaged and branded. The product variety offered for sale on the cooled shelves of any ordinary local supermarket might well exceed the number of different wines on sale in the local off-licences. Different systems for the classification of milk products, in part overlapping with each other, have evolved, which in the main refer to such *objective* criteria as the chemical and nutrient consistency of the milk. In addition to several 'normal milks', which differ from each other only in terms of their varying fat content, 'luxury' products are available such as low-fat A-milk, calcium-added milk (for those fearing or suffering from osteoporosis) or special milk (for those who are allergic to cows' milk). These examples would suggest that milk has become a medicine and drinking milk part of a medical treatment. Even to those who are more interested in enjoying life's small pleasures, several alternatives are on sale, such as sweetened milk-drinks, in handy small plastic bottles or cartons, with flavours to be enjoyed as refreshing soft drinks after jogging or skiing, etc. To complete the picture, a similar array of choices can be found, too, among sour milk and cream products.

It is, however, impossible to prove that this complicated and nuanced system of product classifications would have arisen side-by-side with some

standards of taste developed in a social world(s) of lovers of milk-drinks. In many ways, the development of this modern variety of milk-drinks could better be explained by the needs of the dairy industry and its initiative in diversifying its products under the pressures of changing market conditions and diminishing or stabilising demand. It would also seem to fit very well into a picture of a somewhat homogeneous market, which at regular intervals welcomes minor novelties and where price differentials are not remarkable either. But even in the case of milk-drinks there obviously are some (pseudo) objective criteria of classification that first determine the position of each commodity both as belonging to this particular market and as having a place among potential substitutes. What makes an understanding of such markets difficult is that the relation between the supply side and the demand side is not symmetrical: the meanings and practices which the producers suggest do not necessarily find any adherence among the consumers who might *invent* totally new and unanticipated uses for these products.

The *Erlebnisrational* consumer

Gerhard Schulze's study *Die Erlebnisgesellschaft* (1991), of a society emphasising subjectivity and inner experiences, includes many valuable insights and observations concerning the changing nature of modern consumption and the orientation of modern consumers. Basically an empirical research into the various consumer schemes and the milieu of Nuremberg, West Germany, in the 1980s, it achieved the almost prophetic stature of a *Zeitgiadnose*, a diagnosis of our times, coined in the slogan *Erlebnisgesellschaft*. In Schulze's opinion a drastic change has occurred in the orientation and intentions of the consumer. From a traditional, basically instrumental, orientation to finding effective means of satisfying needs, consumers have moved towards the achievement of subjective mental states. Their inner experiences are the final and only criteria of success.¹ As Schulze formulated it, the subject becomes its own object. Such an activity is rational, but its rationality is of a rather peculiar kind. So far as the purposive activity of means' selection is concerned, this rationality does not differ from instrumental rationality, the effective choice of means by which to achieve some definite ends.

What is peculiar about it is rather the character of the *ends* themselves. The goals of actions are ephemeral subjective states, which change constantly, of which the consumer is often uncertainly aware. Consequently, the selection of means for their achievement also becomes problematical. It is difficult to know when those goals have actually been reached or to judge whether they have been optimally achieved. Needs can be satisfied in principle but one can never know whether the mental state reached – often only for a fleeting moment – was really worth the effort. Perhaps one could have done better and experienced something more exciting or pleasurable by some other means, elsewhere. Furthermore, the same means that helped to gain satisfactory

results at one time could equally well fail at some future time: there can be no guarantee of success (Schulze 1991: 116–17).

By the phrase *Erlebnissociety* Schulze intended to strongly emphasise subjective experiences as the peculiar goal of the activity of consumers in a modern consumer society. As Pasi Falk (1994), for instance, has pointed out, it is to be doubted that consumption in any society, ever, has been characterised by the satisfaction of only objective needs.² Therefore it would be better to treat Schulze's two types of rationality as pure – ideal – types of action. Obviously most acts of consumption unite, to a lesser or greater degree, both aspects. As Csikzentmihalyi (1981) argued, even though there are expressive activities where instrumental concerns play no role (making love, listening to music, climbing a mountain, etc.), it is difficult to conceive of purely instrumental activities where a person would be unaware of how much or how little gratification is derived from the experience at the moment.³ In many cases, however, it makes good sense to speak of consumption as predominantly oriented towards inner experiences (*Erlebnisse*) as compared to more directly needs-oriented or instrumental consumption. Schulze's own examples range from dining at a gourmet restaurant – which, to some people, might be just an ordinary business lunch but which to most would be a special treat to be remembered – to a tractor – which might be driven in races or be an object of adoration to the aficionado but which is mostly 'consumed' as a work instrument, plain and simple. However, not even tractors are *just* tractors any more, their makers claiming, for instance, to offer their drivers a sense of exquisite luxury and comfort. Similarly there are not only gourmet restaurants that cater to the social elite and workplace canteens with crude spoons and plates for the workers, but many intermediary food outlets which also claim to be luxurious, at least to a moderate degree.

Pure examples of 'inner-directed' consumption are to be found in the cultural artefacts, services and products of the culture industry, from movies and TV programmes to recordings of music and concerts, from sports events to literature, from charter flights to southern destinations to Sony PlayStations – none of which so much as pretend to serve any useful purpose: they are there 'just for fun'.

The five principles of consumer demand

Despite or, rather, because of the strong emphasis on the individual's subjective experiences which are typical of the new rationality of consumption, the social patterns emerging from that rationality are far from *individualistic* in any common sense of the word. On the contrary, the society of inner experiences is characterised by a very strong degree of social conformity and homogeneity of behaviour. *Erlebnissociety* is typically a society of (relatively homogenous) mass consumption, admittedly with many individual, social and periodic minor variations, but with very little by way of more daring expressions of people's genuine subjectivity or any excessive individuality of

life styles. This paradoxical conclusion follows from the basic uncertainty and indeterminacy typical of the situation facing a modern consumer. Five interesting principles follow in Schulze's analysis (1991: 433–4). They are all means of coping with the ephemeral nature of consumer goals and the basic subjective uncertainty concerning their achievement.

The principle of correspondence

Singular actions are tied together by some criterion, such as the distinctive style of an individual consumer: things are somehow thought or felt to 'go together' or to fit together. Even that strategy, however, is problematical in relation to ephemeral goals: for instance, the desire to experience something 'exciting' but without being able to articulate what that might be ('I want to visit a new, exciting and stylish restaurant, but, at the same time, I probably wouldn't feel at home there after all.')

The principle of abstraction

This is a strategy based on optimising the outcome of consumption habits or of long-term consumption rather than of single acts. It means using some *abstract* criterion of selection over a wide variety of concrete objects. Typical examples are the preference to consume things sequentially, like TV or radio series, journals or books, or with common threads, such as movies with the same main actors or concerts with the same singers, or restaurants with some typical ethnic cuisine ('I like Chinese food' or 'I only go to real Irish pubs').

The principle of accumulation

Based on the idea of accumulating singular similar experiences, this principle leads to a tendency to repetition. What was successful once is probably worth trying again. On the other hand experiences tend to lose value when repeated. The paradox, which concerns also the principle of abstraction, is that the best experiences often come unexpected, as if by chance, walking along the street ('I always go to my local pub, but something exciting might be happening in the pub just around the corner').

The principle of variation

In compensation for the inherent tendency to repetition, variation is welcomed. It is, however, important to note that this is a question strictly of variation – preferably within a genre – not of real novelty. One changes one's pub, but not the neighbourhood; or one looks for a pub with a greater variety of ales, not for the diversity of its wines. The modern *Erlebnisrational* consumer is not adventurous.

The principle of autosuggestion

This is the main reason for social conformity, and for the close observance of the habits of one's own social milieu. Since one can never be sure of the 'real' worth and value of one's experiences ('I might have missed something more

exciting; was this all there was to it after all!') one constantly looks up for one's peers for the confirmation of their authenticity and value. ('I visited this new pub across the road because my friends now go there and they told me it's nice.' More generally, the surest sign of a good venue is that it's full of people – even better if one has to queue in order to get a table, while next door is a similar place with lots of empty tables.)

As Schulze pointed out, modern consumers are inclined to social conformism not because they feel embarrassed of being different or are afraid of behaving themselves improperly: it is not social propriety that guides them. They follow the example set by others out of personal *uncertainty*, because they are afraid of missing out on something more exciting and important that presumably all others are enjoying. There is no other criterion of the value of an object than one's own belief in it. It is as good as one believes it to be. It is also important to note that such consumption and its validation are beyond the question of manipulation or any false promises since there cannot after all be any objective criteria to prove that there are some other, more real, values attached to the object of consumption.

The main conclusion, then, is that the often presumed individualisation of consumption, for example its liberation both from social restrictions or ties and from the constraints of physical necessity, does not lead to increasing heterogeneity but to increasing homogeneity of consumption, and, more concretely in the case analysed by Schulze, to the formation of a few massive and internally relatively homogenous schemes and milieux of consumption. Novelty and change are welcomed, but only in small, well-proportioned doses. Such variation is not allowed to break with the more general principles of connectedness and uniformity.⁴

The varieties of goodness

The main problem affecting Schulze's position – and in this respect it shares the destiny of many other diagnoses of the goods or ills of modern consumer society – is that in his scheme there is no place for any socially shared principles, or criteria, of goodness other than repetition and the imitation of the 'generalised' other: either you like what all the others seem to like or you are left all on your own to choose according to your own personal whims and wishes. In his scheme the social milieu in which an individual is living is there mainly to confirm by the observable example of others that the individual experience was truly real, that he or she 'was not just making it all up'. The principle of the mass is the only etiquette or guideline of taste, or, if you allow for social segmentation, the example of one's social group. There cannot be any scales of goodness – unless the strength of one's own experiences and their possible resonance with those of others is taken as such. (For an interesting account of broad taste classes, see Gans 1974.) Consequently there cannot be any sensible discussion about the worth of one's taste: one cannot possibly present arguments to convince others of its worth; at most

one might seduce others into trying it. This leads to a state of uncertainty. There is a strong need of aesthetic definition in an *Erlebnissociety*. As Schulze emphasised, following a discussion among German academics about the aestheticisation of everyday life (Gronow 1997), these experiences are aesthetic by their nature, or at least they resemble and can be described as such: they are 'exciting', 'enjoyable', 'interesting', etc.

To take an example used by Schulze, cars are commonly advertised as having capacities that, obviously, are practically useless to any ordinary driver. Since there is a speed limit of some 70 miles per hour in every European country (except, of course, in Germany, the land of Mercedes Benz), one could not, without breaking the law, enjoy to its full capacity a new car capable of a speed of 200 miles per hour which accelerates from zero to 100 in 6 seconds, not to speak of the other technical attributes advertised in new cars. Many drivers would probably still regard these cars as objectively better than many slower and technically less advanced cars. As we know, utensils of home technology, and computers and mobile phones are regularly marketed in similar terms to emphasise their technical superiority – thus, its accumulator lasts a week longer; it is ten times faster than any other; it can be programmed to complete various distinct tasks; the sound output is greater and its quality higher, etc. – and announce capacities mostly never utilised by, and of little practical value to, the great majority of their buyers. A bottle of fine champagne, a Bordeaux wine or a particular caviar might, in the world of food, be equivalent to a Mercedes, though most people would perhaps care very little, and would say that any decent sparkling or red wine or fish roe does equally well. Many might even argue that what in fact they eat or drink is not only cheaper but also tastes much better than other alternatives.

In Schulze's understanding such technically superior qualities as exist are advertised to make a general impression on the buyer and to enliven her or his imagination (whatever subconscious motivations ever presumed). They are symbols of something else (to take a trivial example, fast car = masculine power), which presumably arouses and appeals to the inner mental states of consumers: they promise some exciting experiences and participation in the good life (Falk 1991; Gronow 1997: 442). As such it would not matter at all if the car could not perform as promised, since the owner could not possibly ever test it in practice. For the owner it would be quite satisfactory, so long as he or she is convinced that the car is capable of such performance – and that some other cars are not.

What makes this kind of reasoning somewhat suspect is that, despite the inner-orientation of the consumers, many products are nevertheless presented to them as having presumably technically – and in some sense objectively – superior qualities and capacities. This is true in particular of many items of consumer technology, both domestic and other, but also of more amorphous items, such as foods and drinks. They not only offer a general promise of good life with youthfulness, love and sunny beaches (like Coca Cola) but often refer (and people refer to them too) to their nutritional

value and healthfulness, not to speak of other, less concrete, characteristics, such as better taste or propriety according to some social etiquette, convention or tradition. For people who wish to taste *real* champagne, a 'ready-made' etiquette advises them on what would be the *proper* occasion, manner and place to enjoy it. In other words, they could, like tourists, 'visit' a social world of 'champagne drinkers' and borrow its standards of taste for the occasion. One might, of course, claim that such characterisations as make possible the evaluation of the goodness or fitness of a product are basically inherited remnants from an older culture of use oriented more to instrumental consumption (or of a traditional, ritualistic consumption). People not only want to say that something is pleasant or lovely: they are also rationalising and giving reasons for their preferences and likings, explaining and convincing others of the superiority of their own choices.

What I argue here – in line with my earlier work on the sociology of taste (Gronow 1997) – is that it is reasonable to claim both that modern consumers make their choices on their own, often free from both physical and social constraints, following their personal wishes and whims, and that there are nevertheless some (semi-)objective aesthetic schemes, codes or guidelines of taste which help us to evaluate and choose specific objects of consumption. These guidelines are changing and not fixed; yet they are shared – and often taken for granted – by various groups of people. In following them one can make use of various value scales to evaluate the internal and relative goodness of the objects and services offered. Therefore they can also convincingly be utilised in marketing and advertising. From this it follows that one can improve, even perfect, one's own performance and evaluate the performance of others. This is a possibility which is not restricted to certain virtuoso shoppers (cf. the role Weber reserved to some rare religious virtuosos) but one that is left open to practically any ordinary consumer. Just as one can perform better on the sports field or as an artist, so one can perform better as a consumer or shopper – say, of mobile phones or Italian sausages and cheese. Although such performance might appear to many as irrelevant and uninteresting, all that is needed is that there are *some* significant others who acknowledge its value and are ready to appreciate it.

What I argue here is that such criteria of goodness and improvement of both taste and 'technical' performance do make sense, though not as plain and simple objective criteria of technical superiority as such, nor simply as symbols which refer to some deeper, inner, subjective meanings. There are objective – in the sense of socially shared and binding – aesthetic codes that determine the inner value and relative worth of things to people. They are socially constructed and negotiable, and as such (semi-)objective, aesthetics which are taken for granted by the participants in any – smaller or bigger – social world. They are utilised as reference points even by members of the 'wider' society not necessarily directly involved in their creation and legitimation processes.

This should be evident in the case of such consumer goods as wines, beers or spirits, in relation to which there are readily available systems of classification

of taste and quality. But even in the case of the newly created variety of milk products, both the producers, advertisers and marketers, on the one hand, and the consumers, on the other, can have recourse to such aesthetic standards and seek advice to find new uses for old products or old and new uses for new products. This would not, however, take place in quite the same way as in the case of wines – where the commercial classification and the classifications of the social world(s) of wine lovers coincide and dynamically reinforce and support each other – but in a less pronounced manner. The obvious difference is that there is no such clear-cut social world under whose auspices all or most of the products of this branch of food industry would fall. They are not as essential to the core activities of any social world as, for instance, wines.

The social world perspective

The social world perspective, formulated well over thirty years ago by symbolic interactionists, offers the best conceptual tools with which to develop such an idea of an objective aesthetics which is all the time open to change and which, in principle, encourages the creation of standards and is potentially receptive to new consumer goods (Noro 1995). Social worlds, according to their classic definition, emerge and are organised around some core activities that ‘are believed to be legitimate, fun, appropriate, aesthetically right, morally right, leading to truth’ (Strauss 1983: 128). Such social worlds can be more or less amorphous or they can be organised, varying from thematic chatting groups and lovers of particular art forms to more organised hobby clubs (like a sport-fishing club). Probably the ideal types are to be found among the many well-established free-time clubs, keeping in mind, however, that their constituency is not restricted to an inner core of ordinary members or activists but includes people who are more loosely attached to them and who often outnumber many times the real activists. The main idea is, however, that there is some kind of an involved inner core of members in addition to any amorphous circles of more loosely attached participants with lesser degrees of involvement. According to Strauss, it is when people start taking their collective activities seriously that the need for organisation develops. Members of the group will

design their own sites, regularise their meetings, produce literature for their internal and/or external consumption, inventing/testing/improving/producing/distributing the technology brought into being by the core social world activities; building networks of relationships with necessary external agents (suppliers, distributors, purchasers, promoters, service people, even travel agents); and sometimes, of course, formalizing internal relationships by founding of associations, complete with constitutions, official positions, rules and regulations. (1983: 128)

As the list of activities and agencies in and around any social world suggests, many aspects of commercial consumption naturally become attached to it; most social worlds can equally well give rise to various forms of commercial

activity and application. The rapid development of sports gear and wear offers an illuminating example.

What distinguishes social worlds from other kinds of social organisations is their voluntary nature. And what distinguishes one social world from another is the legitimising process specific to each: in the final instance each has a set of aesthetic rules and procedures, an etiquette or a code, enabling the setting of standards and evaluation. The purpose of aesthetics is two-fold: the identification of objects with aesthetic value (*'Is this art?'*) and of authentic issues, i.e. issues which belong, or are part of, this particular social world; and the establishment of the quality or worth, the aesthetic value, of any single issue that has been acknowledged as authentic (*'Is this good art?'*) (Becker 1982; Gilmore 1990: 150). As Strauss (1982: 180) formulated it,

this question of authenticity is a different issue than whether a given product or performance measures high, medium, or low on some scale: that is, the question of how useful, beautiful, safe, or moral it is . . . The former issue pertains to the boundaries of the social world or sub-social world; the latter involves not a question of boundaries but of the differential embodiment of in-world values.

It is part of the unofficial nature of most social worlds as well as of aesthetic judgements in general that there are no – and in principle cannot be any – explicit rules or regulations concerning such issues. They are learned in a process of socialisation into the world, new members often following the example set by other, more experienced, members (learning by doing). Hence the importance to social worlds – as well as to education in general – of exemplary figures and models.

Types of involvement in social worlds

Most, if not practically all, people belong, in one way or another, to several such social worlds, or circles. The extent of their involvement, however, varies greatly. The typology propounded by David R. Unruh (1979 and 1980), which is based on degrees of involvement, differentiates four types, ranging from the near total life – encompassing the involvement of insiders – to the total non-involvement, or disinterestedness, shown by outsiders or 'strangers', who must nevertheless be somehow 'taken into account' by others more involved in the social world.⁵ These types are (counting from most involved to least involved) the insiders, the regulars, the tourists and the strangers. Insiders and regulars are the elements most constitutive of a social world. Insiders, whose entire social existence and worldview can centre around a single all-important social world, 'seek control, direct, and create social worlds for others'. Their role is one of 'creation and intimacy'. They also take care of the recruitment of new members and arouse the interests of potential new participants. Regulars act as if the social world is their home; they are familiar with its 'etiquette', to which they tend to make few adjustments. Their attitude is characterised by 'integration, familiarity and attachment' (Unruh 1979: 121ff.). The legitimacy

of the etiquette of any social world is achieved by the unquestioning loyalty of the regulars, who mostly take for granted the rules, the relevance of the issues and the scales of worth of that social world, and to a lesser extent, by the interest shown by the tourists.

Tourists, as the name indicates, are occasional visitors to a social world. They do not show any long-term involvement, being motivated by mere curiosity. They must be reasonably aware of the social world to be interested in visiting it, but they are committed to that world only insofar as it remains 'entertaining, profitable, or diversionary' (Unruh 1980: 281). Some social worlds are more dependant on the interest shown by tourists than are others which are more exclusive.

Strangers, in contrast to the other three types, have no involvement at all in the social world. They are not interested in, indeed are not necessarily aware of, its existence or activities. What Unruh evidently has in mind in saying that any social world must take strangers into account is that they are the others, the outsiders, the strangers against whom the other, more involved, participants can contrast their own experiences and worldviews. The term 'stranger' is borrowed from Simmel's *Soziologie*, first published in 1908 (see Simmel 1992: 764). For Simmel, a stranger is an outsider who brings with her or him other and more objective standards and criteria into a social world and so can inspect it impartially. In this way, the presence of a stranger can help to relativise the standards.

Any social world thus has an established and legitimised set of aesthetic evaluations of its own concerning both the authenticity of the issues (the kinds of activities, objects and techniques which belong to that social world) and the evaluation of their relative worth or goodness within that social world. Some social worlds are conservative and are doubtless more concerned to preserve their activities and issues in as stable and unchanging a form as possible, whereas ongoing development and refinement might be a major interest in others. The rules and practices of a social world are always *in principle* negotiable, and can therefore be in a state of constant change. A social world perspective presents only a phenomenology of social worlds, and gives no reasons and explanations as such for the variation and multiplication of social worlds. However, so far as social worlds are either interested in expanding their field of influence and recruiting new regular members (or attracting tourists) or are concerned to maintain the interest of the current insiders and regulars, one would presume that they have some inbuilt mechanism of renewal. Such renovation would more naturally lead to a continual refining and an increasing complexifying of 'the rules of the game' than it would to any drastic changes concerning these basic issues or the value of the 'game' itself.

The segmentation process of social worlds

There is, however, another mechanism, the segmentation process of social worlds, or the emergence of new social sub-worlds from established ones.

The segmentation in the social world of *haute cuisine* through the repeated emergence of *nouvelle cuisines* is a good example of such segmentation (see, for instance, Mennell 1985).

According to Anselm Strauss (1983), one can describe such a segmentation process in seven stages:

- 1 forming a new social sub-world;
- 2 defining and building its legitimate core activity;
- 3 differentiating and defining the new borders;
- 4 writing and rewriting its own history;
- 5 competing for resources with the old one;
- 6 elevating and manoeuvring in arenas;
- 7 further segmentation.

In their exemplary study of recreation specialisation Ditton et al. (1992: 36–7) analysed the ways in which new sub-worlds can distance themselves from their ‘parent’ worlds. In their own case – sport-fishing – segmentation took place

- around spatial distinction or topographic characteristics (different stretches of the stream are important);
- around different objects (fish species);
- around technology and skill (fishing equipment and its use);
- around an ideology (delineating real and authentic experience);
- along the lines of the intersection of social worlds (emerging new hybrids);
- through recruitment. (According to the authors new members tend to maximise chances for new lines of activity, uses of technology, ideological positions and further segmentation; but, in principle, different means and channels of recruitment could, as such, give rise to further segmentation, too.)

One would expect that segmentation in one of these aspects would lead also to differentiation in other aspects and, finally, to the emergence of a separate new social world.

This process of social world segmentation is only a descriptive account; it gives no tools with which to identify the kinds of social worlds which are given to segmentation, say when they will segment and why. One could, however, claim that the greater the number of the insiders and regulars in a social world the more encouraged is the emergence of new sub-worlds, which gradually turn into separate worlds. In such social worlds there may be insufficient room for new insiders wishing to take an active part in the creation and maintenance of the rules and rituals and who therefore are tempted to establish a new social world of their own. In the beginning it will differ only slightly from the old one (‘We play only indoors’ or ‘We eat only simple and stylish food’, that is the real thing), existing alongside it, but gradually will develop into an independent form of an activity with a particular

etiquette of its own. One could probably claim that in our societies such segmentation processes have been greatly accelerated, at least within free-time activities: for instance, in the world of sport new sub-worlds seem to emerge all the time and at an accelerating tempo, often also demanding official recognition as legitimate games (there is, for instance, a growing list of sports waiting to be approved and taken into the official programme of the Olympic Games).

The inner development of the ‘rules of the game’ (in a social world) and the emergence of new ‘games’ (in a social sub-world) are the two parallel mechanisms that explain the renovation and change of social worlds and their aesthetic standards.⁶ Whereas the first leads mainly to refinement and increasing complexity inside an existing social world, the second concerns the very core activity and the authenticity of its issues (something totally new becomes interesting, exciting and worth promoting.)

The principles of supply

It has already been pointed out that the rationality of producers and suppliers is different from that of consumers; yet they must somehow admit of being matched and coordinated. We also know that to most – if not practically all – social worlds some commercial activities are closely attached. Sometimes a social world finds such commercial activities as it needs already in the market where they have been used and consumed in other contexts and for other purposes. They must, however, be redefined in the social world that now utilises them for its own purposes.⁷ Often, by contrast, a new social world will give rise to new commercial activities (the opening of specialist shops, production units or meeting points; the founding of journals; or the promotion of travel arrangements, etc.); and, occasionally, new social worlds emerge around technical innovations and their commercial applications (recently, for instance, various social worlds have emerged around new computer and information technology). A third alternative is that such social worlds have initiated and actively promoted the process of innovation and product development (e.g. the development of the Linux operating system, created with the contributions of thousands of enthusiasts all around the world who are members of a loosely organised social world of computer programmers).

One of the merits of Schulze’s study is that, in addition to analysing the principles guiding the orientation of demand in a *Erlebnissociety*, it described principles governing the supply side. According to him, there are four such principles of, or strategies for, rationalising the supply of products and services (Schulze 1991: 442–3).

- Schematisation is a strategy that helps to incorporate supplies into schemes which are relatively stable over longer periods of time and groups of customers (e.g. musical genres).

- Profiling exists in order to create an aura, or image, of uniqueness around one's products in order to differentiate them from others.
- Transformation creates and offers novelties for sale (again, safe variations of the old rather than real novelties).
- Suggestion corresponds to the principle of autosuggestion on the demand side (since growth of production is inbuilt in the whole economic system there is no need for a principle corresponding to the fifth principle of accumulation on the side of the consumers).

Both sides, the demanders and the suppliers, are thus interested mainly in everyday schemes: producers attach some familiar key stimuli to their products; and consumers have a need for simplification to help their orientation. Change is welcomed, and producers are ready to satisfy it, but there is no big motivation to produce any unexpected and radically different products and services: it is wiser and better, in general, for both sides to play safe.

The social world perspective adds to such analyses an important dimension: it can better explain both consumers' willingness to approve and adopt real novelties of all kinds (they make sense as soon as they become essential issues, objects, services, techniques in any new or old social worlds) and the use of semi-objective social aesthetics regulating the value and worth of various items. This offers the producers no straightforward strategy for determining their future supplies or the marketing of novelties. But it certainly means that the alternatives available are not just those of sticking to old practices, earlier proven successful, or of blindly probing one's way by throwing bait to consumers. There are genuine criteria of authenticity, worth and goodness which make sense to consumers and that can also be utilised, at least to some extent and in various ways, through marketing and design.

Hennion and Méadel (1989: 192) emphasise the crucial role of advertising agencies and marketing institutions in defining what a product really is. They formulated a mediating position in which advertising works as operating in

a world where there is neither technical necessity nor determining needs, without for all that being able to refer comfortably either to the equivalence of all objects or to the arbitrary nature of all desire. Experts of advertising understood their work as mainly to mediate – or fulfil a gap – between these two extremes, to give the product new dimensions. The product is not treated as a ready-made artefact with predetermined objective functions. It changes in their hands going through different steps in various marketing and advertising departments or offices. This is, in their own words, a model 'where it is no longer possible to draw a distinction between the technical characteristics of the product and its signifying character, because everything, from marketing to conditioning by way of product tests, of measurements of the competition and of the internal mobilization of the enterprise, functions on the double register of the object: it is a thing, but a thing for a person. A technical product and a product, which communicates. A product that fulfils a need if it knows how to create the need. (p. 199)

What the social world perspective adds to this very illuminating account of the role of advertising is to show that in accomplishing all this the

advertising agencies operate in a world inhabited by distinct aesthetic schemes in which various objects and services can be placed or have already a well-established position. The schemes and places inhabited by the object are not stable but in a permanent state of change and transformation, new schemes emerging while old ones wither away. This is identical to the way in which individuals inhabit modern society. As Georg Simmel (1955) suggested, individuals normally belong to several social circles, investing various degrees of involvement in each, and their very individuality is determined by the specific combination of such social worlds. Thus, one could claim that, normally, any one artefact or service can simultaneously belong to several social worlds and play a more-or-less similar or different role and have a different meaning in each of those worlds.

The social world perspective does not, of course, offer any simple solution to the problems of marketing, still less guarantee commercial success. Whether any one new object or service offered for sale and marketed to the members of a social world (presuming that it would be possible to identify them with sufficient precision) really finds some resonance and stimulates demand depends, finally, on the insiders and regulars' recognition of the object as their own – as having an intrinsic value in this particular social world. The relations between the producers and these involved members of social worlds are asymmetrical and not reciprocal: a producer's rationality is not the same as that of a consumer. Producers themselves are not usually – and in many cases could not possibly be – members of these social worlds. What the producers can do is to try to be well informed about such social worlds and their particular aesthetics, which might be or become relevant for consumers of their products. In any case, there is an objective reference point, a socially valid frame, between the subjective image of the product and its objective characteristics – which actually first helps to determine them – to which both consumers and producers, in their respective ways, can refer. (These frames are also, however, transformed constantly due to their own activities and interests.) This is equally true in the worlds of fashion and home electronics, of cuisine and cars, wines and beers, PCs and mobile phones, etc.

The point was made earlier that at times new commercially successful enterprises emerge directly from the activities of (non-commercial) social worlds. Insiders who started as enthusiastic volunteers, with a particular hobby as their passion, may gradually turn it into a profession, open shops, workshops or service centres. They might thereafter become pure businessmen, though some will preserve or even strengthen their former status as core members in their social worlds. In a similar way, one could claim that producers often are their own best customers (think, for instance, of the various art worlds whose producers, mediators, critics and managers frequent exhibitions, buy each others' works). In this way, there could be, at least in some fields, a closer relationship, even cooperation, between certain producers and key consumers. For example, Pierre Bourdieu (1984: 367) suggested that

members of the new middle class, in particular those active in new professions, often were their own best customers.

The food scene: how to identify social worlds

One of the main problems in the empirical study of social worlds is of knowing how to identify them. It is evident that one can identify in food culture (defined here as cooking and eating), as in almost any important sphere of human life, numerous more-or-less well-organised big social worlds. No systematic empirical research has been conducted about them and therefore the following remarks are preliminary and hypothetical.⁸

It would understandably be impossible to identify all the members of a social world – not to speak of tourists and strangers – lacking any formal organisation and membership status. Their identification becomes obviously more difficult the less involved the members are. Howard Becker (1982; see also Unruh 1980: 291) suggests that the best way to recognise a social world is to identify its core product – loosely defined as objects, experiences or events (for instance, wine-tasting) – and trace it back to all those who contribute to its production and circulation (in addition to the obvious wine producers and sellers, connoisseurs, experts, critics, etc.). Equally important as key products for the identification of social worlds are their communication centres since the limits of effective communication are also the limits of any one social world. Such centres vary from authorised publishers and publications, to information sites and key informants (e.g. wine journals and media programmes). Also, social worlds often present themselves to outsiders in specific places and spaces, such as specialist outlets (a gourmet shop or a wine exhibition) where members gather.

The social worlds perspective can explain one of the surprising features of modern food culture. It has been argued that eating and culinary delights are not, as a matter of course, the central issues in the lives of most people. The meals of most Scandinavians, for instance, are by no means notably imaginative or varied (Kjaernes 2001). And yet popular culture tells a different story: many TV programmes on food compete with the most popular soap operas in terms of viewing figures; the most popular food journals have large circulations; newspapers feature popular food columns; every year hundreds of new cookery books, many of them big editions, are published for Christmas; and sampling the local cuisine is a ‘must’ for holidaymakers wherever they are. Judging from this one would imagine that culinary culture, both at home and in restaurants, would occupy a prominent place in the lives of most people and that people generally would be extremely concerned with issues of eating.

The secret is that social worlds of food, probably because they are relatively familiar and offer ease of access to practically everyone, seem to seduce many tourists willing to visit them at least occasionally to have a taste of – or only a look at⁹ – what they have to offer. Thus, many people offer themselves

and their families occasional 'treats', Sunday lunches or dinners with friends, at which something 'special' is served; and to do so, they have merely to 'visit' some relevant social worlds. For tourists, the 'relevance of a social world is often times pre-packaged, directed and coached' (Unruh 1979: 124), and often for sale too. Regulars and insiders have an important task to enact their social worlds for the benefit of interested tourists and offer their treats in nice ready-made packages.

Judging by the popularity of food columns in newspapers and food and health journals, many tourists visit these social worlds with regularity. The origins of all public discourses on food cannot, by any means, be traced back to any social world in the strict sense. Much of the programmatic, ideological, entertaining or persuasive talk about food in the media most certainly does not have any direct relation or relevance to any existing social world. They are mostly just recycled items from the very rich historical cultural knowledge of food accumulated through the ages and offered for public entertainment by journalists; and, like other retro-fashions they are often wrapped up in new packaging. Therefore, in order to identify interesting social worlds of food one should, following Becker's advice, look out for various recommended standards of taste and etiquette, but also, and primarily, for products and 'services' (in the wider sense of the word), techniques, instruments and tools, as well as for communication centres of various kinds and key figures.

With these reservations in mind, one could as a preliminary divide the social worlds of food into two big groups. One group is concerned mainly with culinary taste, cooking skills and table etiquette. Further division by such criteria as the presumed cultural or geographical origin of foodstuffs, preferred methods of preparation or kitchen technology, preferred venues for and company with whom to share the experience, the importance of cooking versus eating, or some natural classification of dishes (fish, vegetarian, beef, etc., or according to their provenance). If one adds the dimension of drink one easily finds several more (beer-lovers versus wine-lovers, fans of single-malt whisky versus Russian vodka, abstainers, mineral-water enthusiasts, traditional sour-milk drinkers, etc.). It would be relatively easy to find in almost any European country clubs, journals, publications, restaurants and other meeting places that cherish one or more of these or similar 'core' issues. Evidently there are also tens of thousands of insiders and regulars who treat them with gravity.

One of the most influential and interesting recent examples of this kind of social world is the Slow Food (SF) Movement, which originated in Italy but has become a worldwide phenomenon (see Murdoch and Miele, chapter 7 of this volume). It started as a reaction to the opening of McDonald's restaurants in Rome and around Italy in the early 1980s, its main task the promotion of local and regional cuisines. It has developed a formal organisation and very elaborate standards of culinary taste that are used to judge whether any given food or dish is 'authentic', i.e. real slow food, and what its relative

worth is. SF is interesting because it has had commercial implications from the very beginning. During its short life it has already experienced segmentation and change as ecological concerns and agricultural policy have become increasingly important issues on its agenda. SF offers an interesting example of a social world that has evolved into a social movement. What separates a social movement from a 'pure' world is that it has a political agenda and a platform from which to defend the importance of its concern, with varying degrees of activity and aggression, to others, or 'strangers'.

The other important, and rapidly increasing, visible group of social worlds is centred around the issues of health and fitness. The most popular and organised ones inevitably are concerned mainly with weight-watching. The worldwide enterprise Weight Watchers is probably one of the best organised and biggest, but new dietary programmes, with their own techniques and methods, promises and ideologies, and with (inconsistently) serious and involved practitioners, emerge all the time. Weight Watchers has an added dimension, which makes it, like Alcoholics Anonymous, akin to a religious sect: one can become 'hooked' on it. Losing weight following the programmed steps becomes a lifelong struggle for adherents, just as a virtuous life is the goal of a believer wishing to please a god. On the other hand, any 'tourist' can make a visit to this world by, for example, buying a ready-made Weight Watcher's meal from the supermarket.

In general, however, such social worlds could be called 'dietary worlds' as opposed to 'taste worlds'. They recommend tightly organised and restricted diets (from strict vegetarians to vitamin freaks, from those who eat only 'living food' to those who cook everything in an oven, from those who follow the rules of official nutrition science to those who practise some self-made or 'folk' dietary beliefs – diet variations are endless). Many insiders find that such social worlds fill their time and give life meaning, whereas regulars might follow the diets recommended but not make that their main duty. At the same time numerous tourists continue to visit one or more of them periodically, not necessarily staying loyal to a single world for any extended period of time, not taking them necessarily all that seriously, either, but, anyhow, following and adopting their aesthetics in some relevant aspects. In ultimate cases, a social world can become almost private. In such cases a dedicated insider faces the danger of receiving the stigma of deviancy or mental illness. Such would be the case, for instance, for a private collector who keeps her or his collection totally secret or has value standards that are not intelligible to anyone else.

Good and bad food

How does all this help us to determine the goodness of any food product, a dish, a dinner or a drink? The question is problematical and its answer can be determined only within the limits of a certain social world. Many products, just like individuals, can participate in numerous social worlds at the same

time, and therefore their measuring stocks can be diverse and often even negate one another. Anyone interested in marketing a product can therefore choose from two distinct strategies. One is to try to convince as many social circles as possible that the product is of special value to them, even though to each of them it would be so in a different way: it can be tasty, nutritionally balanced, an essential part of a traditional national cuisine, local, vitamised, easy to cook, festive, etc. The more 'hooks' the product has the better – up to that certain point when they start competing with and eliminating each other and cease to be at all convincing. To many regulars and insiders products with multiple dimensions might also feel inauthentic.

The other marketing strategy is to concentrate effort to convey the merits of the product to just a single social world, one to which, however, it is understood to be extraordinarily important – possibly the product without which that social world could not exist at all. This leads to specialisation and emphasises the uniqueness of the product. It is easy to name numerous, already classic, examples from the social world of haute cuisine, such as truffles, oysters, *foie gras*; champagne or wines from Bourdeaux; or, in their own right, traditional British ales; and, to take some Finnish examples, caviar from white fish, river crabs, or some particular wild mushrooms or berries. One could equally well name several such products that are important and very specific to certain dietary social worlds (milk products to people who do not tolerate milk, margarine without any fat at all, products with calcium added to people fearing osteoporosis, ecological products cultivated without any possible 'unnatural' technical means, etc.). Most social worlds are open to tourists from other worlds who can often make use of such special offers and by experimenting with them or redefining them incorporate them into their own aesthetics and thus enrich their own culinary experiences. This process of crossbreeding, and the ensuing potential for the emergence of new social sub-worlds, seem to be accelerating in our times.

There is a group of social worlds related to food and eating that enjoys a peculiar position and a certain hegemonic privilege in defining certain generally applicable aesthetic standards. These comprise state officials and experts who enjoy the legitimising status of science and whose task it is to take care of national health and guard us from the risks or harmful effects of food and drink. Insofar as such experts and their organisations have alone acted as guardians of food safety their authority has been undisputed (cf., however, the cases of food scares and scandals like mad cow disease). When, with developments in biotechnology and preventive medicine, they are increasingly expected to identify not only what is dangerous and harmful but also what is good and healthful, their role becomes more problematical. To the extent that they can issue legal restrictions and punish those who break them (for instance, in such clear-cut cases when 'false' vodka kills people, or when there is a danger of food poisoning) they play a special role, not quite like those of other social worlds active in food culture (such worlds are more organised and have clear rules restricting their membership, too).¹⁰

On the other hand, so far as they act as experts who give advice and information, and make recommendations about healthful eating habits, their social institutions do not, in fact, differ much from those of other social worlds. They have their loyal followers as well as tourists, their occasional, rather mildly interested, visitors. What marks them out as different is that they speak with the – undoubtedly great – authority of science and the State. At least as far as product development in the food industry is concerned, these ‘semi-official’, and at times pseudo-official, social worlds which enjoy the authority of health sciences are at present the central points of reference. Even though the numerous new milks, sour milks and creams sometimes taste unusual and some people might claim to enjoy the taste of one more than that of another, in the main the dividing lines between the products are based on their presumed health effects. At one level one can choose between different degrees of fat content in milk; at a more sophisticated and, as a rule, expensive level, one can choose from all kinds of health-promoting or illness-preventing additives and ingredients of milk. But, ultimately, we do not really know whether these classifications – readily offered by the producers, with the support of the social worlds of science and printed on the packaging or declared in advertisements – are, in fact, regarded by their users as relevant to the attainment of the desired inner experiences. Some of them might be considered totally irrelevant, and people’s real reasons for buying them might lie altogether elsewhere. Some again might be made to fit into a very different context of aesthetic evaluation.

Thus, the social world perspective offers a discursive way of understanding quality and claims to quality. It allows for the fact that people in distinct social circles make different judgements about products and foodstuffs. Such judgements are not reflections of personal idiosyncracies, but tend to conform to the standards (though these are subject to regular alteration) upheld within particular social worlds. Quality, or rather the identification of relevant qualities, is therefore part of an ongoing process of negotiation, of claim and counter-claim, both within a social circle and across boundaries to other circles. There is, on this view, no generic consumer whose behaviour can be modelled outside of particular, and often specialising, social contexts.

Notes

- 1 This is, of course, reminiscent of the idea of a more general cultural change from instrumental to expressive orientation, or from work to leisure and pleasure, presented in theories of post-industrial society (see, for instance, Bell 1974).
- 2 Even though it has a particular emphasis of its own, Schulze’s diagnosis resembles, in some respects, the characterisations of many recent analysts concerning the essential novelty of a modern society of consumption. In his early work Jean Baudrillard (1981), for instance, contrasted the economy of signs with the production of use values. Colin Campbell (1986) identified the daydreamer who is always striving for something new and previously unexperienced as the model of the modern consumer. It has also obvious resemblances to Pasi Falk’s eternal

seeker for the substitutes among the world of commodities as a substitute for the maternal symbiosis lost in early childhood. Falk's modern consumer (1994) can, in fact, never be satisfied. Bauman's diagnosis (2000) of the 'lonely', always wishful, consumer, faced with the hopeless task of finding real satisfaction, reached almost existentialist dimensions. The modern consumer is, in Bauman's understanding, forced to live in a condition of perpetual uncertainty and angst. Such an existentialist interpretation of the human condition of the modern consumer as something that never can genuinely be shared with others is deeply rooted in the general suspicion concerning leisure, pleasure and expressive activities as something purely subjective and therefore less essential than instrumental activities like productive work (see Csikszentmihalyi 1981).

- 3 Cf. Mukerji's comment (1978: 349) that 'the tendency to conceive of plastic combs in people's pockets and paintings in museums as completely unrelated kinds of objects obscures an important connection between the two: both are designed to have cultural meanings and social ones'.
- 4 This conclusion supports Gronow and Warde's argument (2001) in another context: that one should pay more attention to repetitive behaviour, routines and 'ordinary' consumption. In fact, in most cases of everyday consumption (for instance, eating) hardly any exciting subjective experiences are sought after (this is related to the problem of 'high involvement' versus 'low involvement' in consumption).

At first glance there would seem to be a contradiction between the tendency to conformity and fashion. One can, however, solve the contradiction between the demand for novelty and surprise as expressed in fashion and the schematisation and the consequent monotony of consumption identified in Schulze's principles. Despite the principal novelty, contingency, unexpectedness of fashion, it represents a pacified and not a 'revolutionising' mode of change. Typically, fashion fulfils the criteria of variation within a genre. As Herbert Blumer (1969) argued, fashion is a relatively harmless means of learning to tolerate and cope with perpetual social change.

- 5 As C. W. Park and Mittal Banwari (1985) have argued in discussing the notions of low and high involvement widely used in consumer research, to be involved presumes some emotional intensity and awareness. Some items of consumption might, however, be very important to a consumer simply as part of his daily routines, in which case it would not be natural to say that he or she is highly involved with them. By distinguishing between insiders and regulars one can avoid the problem, at least in part. Insiders are really involved in their social world, while regulars take it more routinely for granted. The social world and its objects, issues and activities are important in the lives of both of them, and could not easily be replaced by others.
- 6 In Bourdieu's (1984) analysis of the processes of distinction both of these mechanisms are present. Competition with a social class tends to lead to refinement, whereas the emergence of 'new classes' as challengers tends to redefine the rules of the game. In the latter case the value of the former aspirations is totally denied and new standards of worth established.
- 7 One of the best examples is the redefinition which necessarily accompanies the transformation of ordinary objects in daily use into valued collectibles. To take another good example used by Mukerji (1978: 354): 'some features of pot fragments in museums may interest potters, and other may interest anthropologists'.

- 8 See, however, Gary Fine's exemplary (1996) study of the social world of food producers and restaurant cooks, and the aesthetic standards of their craft as well as their relationship to the economic interests of their trade.
- 9 Reading or collecting cookery books can also be a serious hobby.
- 10 The character and the role of the legally authorised rules of food safety which exist in every country could be compared with the building codes of plumbing, used as an example by Muckerji (1978: 356): 'today plumbing and other craft traditions are protected and innovations in plumbing techniques limited by building codes which are meant to distinguish between good and bad work, but also to allow for a large amount of good work to be both created and legitimated. Codes are strict enough to discourage massive amounts of amateur work, making the work of professional plumbers more valuable, but they are not detailed enough to distinguish outstanding from adequate work. In this system almost everyone can have good plumbing (or plumbing that is recognizable within the traditional value systems), but probably little rare and independently valuable plumbing is identifiable.' Present-day Russia is an instance of a country with many such codes that often are not followed and where hardly anyone actually believes in their functioning. For instance, according to some recent reports 40 per cent of all instant coffee on sale in Russia is faked and one-third of the inhabitants of St Petersburg report having suffered from food poisoning during the last year.

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