

Discreetly Ostentatious

by Ève Sihra

Traditionally, the dominant classes displayed their superiority by flaunting their wealth through their purchases. According to Elizabeth Currid-Halkett, the affirmation of status is undergoing a dramatic transformation and is now expressed by far more discreet signifiers, where distinction is the new ostentation.

Reviewed: Elizabeth Currid-Halkett, *The Sum of Small Things. A Theory of the Aspirational Class*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2018, 272 p.

Which would you choose, a luxury handbag or a subscription to the *New Yorker*? In her book *The Sum of Small Things*, Elizabeth Currid-Halkett notes that the elite distinguish themselves today by a range of inconspicuous and inexpensive choices, which include reading a newspaper or the colour of a nail varnish, rather than through luxury goods. Although these choices may seem secondary, they ensure social ascension or the perpetuation of a dominant position. The upper class of the 21st century that the author calls the *aspirational class*, invests more in its cultural capital than in its economic capital. A reading of *The Sum of Small Things* may encourage you to choose a subscription to the *New Yorker*; but belonging to the aspirational class is not that easy.

Social hierarchy and consumption

Thorstein Veblen, whom the author draws from, shows how the late 19th century nobility and upper bourgeoisie displayed their social success by a conspicuous consumption of goods and leisure activities. The term describes a type of wasteful and visible expenditure; wasteful as proof that one's status permits it, and visible as a means of gaining social recognition of this status.

Hence, to increase their prestige, every individual spends as much as they can on trying to imitate the signs of success displayed by the members of the richest class. This is not a new phenomenon; since ancient Rome, archaeology reveals decorative features found in the richest houses, imperfectly copied in the homes of the lower classes. In turn, the democratisation of interior decoration led the elites of the time to employ increasingly rare materials and techniques in order to set themselves apart (Wallace-Hadrill, 1990).

This historical perspective shows that each class of society follows a specific pattern of conspicuous behaviour. Lower classes tend to emulate the practices of the upper classes who themselves raise the stakes to distinguish themselves and maintain their dominant position in the social hierarchy. Economic growth tends to amplify this phenomenon (Baudrillard 1970, 1972).

Elizabeth Currid-Halkett nonetheless highlights the specificity of contemporary society in comparison to Ancient Rome, or the end of the 19th century. Today, material goods are readily available to every strata of society and status is mainly dependent on an acquisition of knowledge, degrees and skills. Cultural capital is no longer a mere pastime for the elite, but the cornerstone of their success:

While their symbolic position sometimes manifests itself through material goods, mostly [the elite] reveal their class position through cultural signifiers that convey their acquisition of knowledge and value system – dinner party conversation around opinion pieces [...] and showing up at farmer's markets. (p. 18)

The status choices the upper classes make also allow them to maintain their dominant position for their descendants. Today, the children of the aspirational class inherit a considerable investment in what the author calls 'inconspicuous' goods. These consist of values, opinions, dispositions and an education that allow them to indicate their social position and to access the best opportunities. These goods transmit social privilege just as efficiently as a title of nobility or material goods did in Thorstein Veblen's time.

The new avatars of distinction

Elizabeth Currid-Halkett bases her work on field observations and surveys of consumer expenditure carried out by the *Bureau of Labor Statistics*, to sketch a portrait of the changes in consumption in the United States. Using this data, she shows that the share of the budget the richest households dedicate to conspicuous consumption (cars, furniture, clothing, etc.) is lower than for households with more modest incomes. In relative terms, the richest are not those who seek to distinguish themselves the most obviously through their consumption of material goods.

The most well-off households, on the contrary, spend far more than the others on investments which appear inconspicuous, although they are a source of status distinction. A first expenditure category leads to the creation and reinforcement of differences at a lower cost, like shopping at farmer's markets, the colour of one's nail varnish, or reading the *New Yorker*. This expenditure is not only distinctive, but goes hand in hand with expensive investments that provide a better quality of life or offer future opportunities (baby sitter, holidays, education, health, retirement plan).

Most of the readers trolling through the pages of the *New Yorker* and the *New York Times* are likely to have \$40,000-plus college educations [...] from elite institutions and spend time with similarly educated people with whom they trade opinions and information. (p. 60)

The difference in inconspicuous expenditure by income category also tends to increase over time. Since the Great Depression (2007-2013), high-income households have increased their inconspicuous consumption and decreased their expenditure on conspicuous goods, while the opposite trend is visible among the middle classes. Education is the most representative of this divergence, and also the most likely to consolidate the social success of the aspirational class. Since 1996, expenditure on education by the richest has increased by 300 %, while there is hardly any increase for the other income deciles. The cost of these inconspicuous goods also increases over time (the cost of education increased by 80 % between 2003 and 2013). These observations show that the strategies employed by the upper classes tend to become increasingly subtle, but no less expensive: ostentation gives way to distinction.

Making consumption meaningful

The aspirational class does not only seek to achieve and maintain a certain social status, it also wants to feel it deserves its position. The efforts of the elite to legitimise their positions are far from new; what has changed is the new underlying moral order. Take, for example, the experience of motherhood: far from the days of wet-nurses, breast-feeding is now the norm in the richest and most educated circles. Parents who belong to the aspirational classes spend a considerable amount of time, and a large share of their resources, on giving their offspring the best opportunities:

Whether pursuing breast-feeding to increase baby's IQ, or art classes at the age of three, [...] aspirational class parents see their children as developmental projects and initiate structured and cultivated modes of parenting to maximize their children's future success. (p. 97)

Today, the choices the aspirational class makes, and their leisure activities, are enlightened and productive. We no longer see the conspicuous wastage of Thorstein Veblen's time, but a conscious investment in the hope of future returns. Indeed, the merits of breastfeeding, playing musical instruments, buying local products or going to the gym are self-evident and the aspirational class quite naturally considers that it deserves the benefits of these investments/ returns on its investment in these practices.

The choices the rich make are, however, the result of the economic and social freedom they enjoy due to their position in society, and a capitalist production system that provides them with products that set them apart. Elizabeth Currid-Halkett mentions, for instance, the growing popularity of specialty coffees, which are marketed as products that create a bond between coffee cultivators, sellers and consumers. She labels this phenomenon 'conspicuous production': the purchase becomes an experience in which the production process and the atmosphere of the shop are just as important, or even more so, than the product itself. While this type of purchase clearly serves an ethical purpose, it cannot be separated from the individual's desire to construct a well-defined social identity.

A new theory of consumption?

Elizabeth Currid-Halkett's book enables us to identify how consumption practices are changing in the 21st century. Using a combination of statistical and

qualitative methods, it renews the tools we can use to grasp how the upper classes distinguish themselves and reproduce their privileges.

Several points, however, may be underlined in this analysis. Goods defined as inconspicuous could just as easily be qualified as conspicuous, and the threshold is not obvious. The author's decisions are not always justified and could affect the statistical results. In addition, the data used does not allow the analysis of a key expenditure category for the upper classes, namely savings. Finally, the aspirational class covers a wide range of people, from the hipster to the founder of a start-up or the university professor. The signs that distinguish these populations are not all as effective when it comes to the reproduction or acquisition of privileges. The ability to afford a high quality education or health insurance is probably correlated with shopping at organic markets, but first and foremost, it requires a high economic capital.

Finally, the work lacks an analysis of consumption processes in terms of class relations. The strength of Veblen's theory lies in his ability to develop a system of consumption where the choices made by the different classes echo each other. Pierre Bourdieu, who is mentioned a few times, and Jean Baudrillard provide valuable concepts to grasp the interdependency of contemporary consumption practices. As Elizabeth Currid-Halkett admits, *The Sum of Small Things* focuses mainly on the upper classes. The other side of the story, the consumption practices of the lower classes, is largely absent. A deeper dialogue between sociology and economics would result in a better understanding of the dynamics of consumption. *The Sum of Small Things* is a first step in this direction; let us hope that similar works will follow.

Further Reading:

- Baudrillard, J. (1970). *The Consumer Society. Myths and Structures* Sage Publications, (1998).
- Baudrillard, J. (1972) Gallimard. *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*. Telos Press Ltd (1981).
- Bourdieu, P. (1979) Minuit. *Distinction. A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Harvard University Press (1984).
- Isherwood, B., and Douglas, M. (1979). *The World Of Goods*. Allen Lane.
- Veblen, T. (1899). *The Theory Of The Leisure Class*. The New American Library.

- Wallace-Hadrill, A. (1990). *The Social Spread Of Roman Luxury: Sampling Pompeii And Herculaneum*. Papers of the British School at Rome, 58, pp. 145-192.

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