

Milestones for an archaeology of taste

Christian Barrère

Université de Reims Champagne Ardenne, Laboratoire Regards, EA 6292

christian.barrere@univ-reims.fr

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An increasing number of goods combine or substitute their utilitarian, instrumental or functional characteristics with hedonistic characteristics (Hirschman and Holbrook, 1982; Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982) and/or ethical ones (Garabedian, 2007). They appeal, directly or indirectly, to consumers' "tastes". Today, in almost all areas of consumption, we can see taste effects (among which snob, bandwagon or Veblen effects are only a small part), alongside with the traditional price and income effects but different from them. When Apple unveiled its iPhone project in 2007, Microsoft CEO Steve Ballmer, believing that the product would not meet any demand, said, "There's no chance that the iPhone is going to get any significant market share. No chance". At the end of 2018 Apple claims an active iPhone fleet of 1.4 billion devices! Building an economic analysis of taste requires defining taste and specifying its economic dimension. Our text aims to contribute to an economic analysis of taste by putting forward proposals for an operational definition of taste.

The method we use is based on the archeological method of Foucault (1966, 1969). Before the 18th century and Hume's philosophy in particular, the word taste only refers to the gustatory sense. For two millennia the different Western societies have been able to think the world and society and debate human behavior without resorting to any notion of taste. Thus, instead of seeking to identify a true and trans-historical definition of taste, we have to distinguish the different discourses, held at different times, on related facts and practices, dependent on different epistemes, in an archaeology of taste.

The main results and propositions are:

- The world of taste, which emerged in the 18th century, replaces the world of beauty that reigned in Antiquity and that the Renaissance had reinterpreted and the world of good.
- In the discourses of the world of Beauty the notion of taste does not appear insofar as its field is covered by that of beauty and that beauty is objective and therefore indisputable. The role of individuals and the public is limited, they do not have to "appreciate" beauty but only to "recognize" it. The search for the principles of beauty (harmony, measure,...) expresses this objectivist conception. The domination of aesthetics devaluates the sensual taste, a devaluation that is part of a more general approach of devaluation of senses. Antiquity, by distinguishing objectively and unquestionably beautiful things in the world, laid the foundations for what would become the Western conception of aesthetics for centuries.
- The Western Middle Ages go beyond the ancient discourse of the world of Beauty to a discourse of the world of Good. Consumption choices, and, more broadly, forms of behavior, are deduced, in a very strict and strong way, from the criterion of Good. In these conditions, taste has no place because individual choices are entirely and strictly determined by norms linked, by the Church, to what is Good, what is in conformity with Christian values (Baschet, 2018; Croix and Quéniart, 2005). What we call taste is therefore covered by the notion of respect for religious norms. The dualist opposition of good and evil is redoubled by the idea of a natural order wanted and created by God around a hierarchical principle, going from Heaven, God's domain to the underground, Lucifer's domain. An order that affects everything, every being, every group, a determined place and that must obviously be respected since it had been defined by God. Such an order gives a principle of perfect homology, which makes it possible to define tastes, actually norms, as the representation of the Great Chain of Being perfectly expresses it (Lovejoy, 1936). The ancient discourse of the aesthetics of beauty is absorbed by transforming beauty into an element of the divine order so that aesthetic taste is derived from the ethics of religious values, emphasizing in particular symbolic sensitivity.



- As Eco (1987) shows, around the 15th century there is a radical change in aesthetic sensitivity that closed off medieval aesthetics and opened up to Renaissance aesthetics. The status of the artist is modified, which will contribute to the debate on aesthetic issues and thus prepare the reflection on taste. On the one hand, the idea of an art community between performers of different eras and thus of a unity of art as an autonomous domain calls into question its submission to religious values and norms. On the other hand, the idea of different styles, and, consequently, of a relativism of artistic norms, questions the reduction of taste to the objectivist conception of beauty. The extension of the field of taste to manners (mainly the Courts' manners) and the increasing complexity of the definition of beauty in art, when humanism develops (Margolin, 2004), break the old conception of beauty. It is now necessary to identify and evaluate the qualities of things. Taste becomes a discovery of the quality of the thing, a quality that remains intrinsic to it. To do this, society will use judgment criteria to determine whether the thing complies with the canons and the rules of beauty and good taste.
- The discourses of Beauty and Good reach their limits during the 18th century. Empiricist British philosophy, from Shaftesbury to Hume, takes into account the relativism of tastes and questions the possibility of taste standards; the new debates explicitly focus on taste, basing it on sensitivity and pleasure. Hume (1739, 1741, 1751, 1757) is the first to clearly express, before Kant, that taste results from judgment: individuals love or dislike, feel taste or disgust, pleasure, displeasure or pain. Hume refers to taste as a "verdict". This will eventually lead to the Kant's revolution, which treats the qualities of things as relationships between men (subjects), and things (objects) and no longer as intrinsic properties of things.
- Kant (1790) develops and synthesizes all the contributions of the time in a theoretical revolution that put man, and no longer God, in the foreground. Kant theorizes the relationship between things and people as a relationship of judgment, the taste judgment, in a context of intersubjectivity (Uzel, 2004): it is a specific type of judgment, which cannot be modelled on



either scientific or moral judgment. The taste judgment is based on the interplay between reason and sensitivity.

- For Kant, the word taste is ambiguous because it refers both to the sensual taste, the perception of what is pleasant, and the reflective taste, the representation of what is beautiful. This is an essential point for the relevance of the Kantian conception because it limits the notion of judgment of taste to that of beauty, which will certainly pose some problems for us to analyze contemporary taste. Nevertheless, Kantian conception includes taste into the modern epistemology of The Man, replacing in this way the God of the episteme of Resemblance and the natural order of that of Representation: man judging taste, demanding taste and producing taste.
- Then production discourses may open up, proposing different responses, the Nietzschean cult of subjectivity, emotion and creativity challenged by the neo-rationalist response of the Frankfurt School. For Nietzsche, taste is the result of the creative activity when the approach developed by Walter Benjamin (1936) and the Frankfurt School leads to define taste as embodied in the goods, mainly in the commodities. While Kant imagined a direct object-subject relationship, the categories of understanding being internalized in the subject as universal data, characteristics of the human mind, the Frankfurt school's critical approach involves an institutional mediation between object and subject, exercised, for a specific purpose (making capital profitable), by specific devices as marketing (Cochoy, 1999), advertising, or the media.
- According to the analyses of Braudel (1985) and Dobb (1969), we can interpret the submission of the field of culture to capital as allowing capital to enter an area with high potential profitability because it is largely disconnected from the regulation that competition from producers can exercise on cost standards. Contrarily to the constructions in terms of aesthetic, hedonistic or artistic capitalism (Assouly, 2008; Boltanski and Chiapello, 1999; Charles, 2005; Clouscard, 1981; Lipovetsky, 2004; Lipovetsky and Serroy, 2013; Maffesoli, 1988,



1990) the development of mass consumption is not an hypertrophy of consumption but derives from the invasion by capitalist logic of fields hitherto covered by non-market self-production or by market economy operating on the basis of market and non-capitalist relations. The taste industries, offering products main characteristics of which are taste characteristics, not only penetrate into the capitalist stage of Braudel but also add to it the traditional domains of taste that were essentially involved in the two previous stages, material life and market economy. The extension of the taste industries thus opens new horizons for the most advanced capitalism. Finally, Frankfurt School's discourse can be linked to successive stages in the development of the social aesthetics defined by Simmel (1903, 1907).

- The Kantian approach allows us to conceive taste as a relationship between an object (a good, a service, commodity or non-market good) and a subject (an individual, a group, a society): taste is the judgment expressed by a subject on the characteristics of the object providing (or not) amenities. These amenities belong to the domain of pleasure which can be intellectual (reading a good novel), sensual (eating a good dish, looking at a beautiful painting,...), emotional (visiting a foreign country, sharing a meal,...) or even ethical (succeeding in eating organic food, talking with locals,...). The Kantian approach to taste, which cannot be overlooked insofar as it defines taste as a subject-object relationship, is nevertheless capable of being enriched to enable the analysis of contemporary taste. Kant, against British empiricists, wants to "rationalize" taste, dissociating it as much as possible from the senses to put it under the control of reason, and, in this way, prioritizes the senses by devaluing those which are the most "physical" (touch, smell and gustatory taste) to the benefit of those (sight and hearing) which are the most "intellectual". To clarify the characteristics of contemporary taste, we cannot take up the Kantian distinction between intellectual taste for beauty and sensual taste for pleasure, with the devaluation of the latter that it implies. The taste of pleasure can no longer be left solely to subjectivity and immediacy as the demand for taste characteristics will increasingly focus on characteristics that are pleasing, in the broad sense,

and not beauty, in the narrow sense. The taste of pleasure involves too a complex judgment. No specialist in gastronomy or oenology, no gourmet thinks that the appreciation of a dish or a wine is simple and immediate.

- Universalism of intellectual taste and its Kantian requisite, disinterestedness, meet with Bourdieusian and post-Bourdieusian criticism, which makes taste a place of distinction and thus breaks the agreement of all around the same values. While Kant settles the question of common sense by affirming that, in intellectual taste, each subject tends to put himself in the place of another at the same time, Bourdieu tells us that, precisely, each seeks to distinguish himself from the others and not to identify with them. Communication, according to Ricoeur (1985), supposed to be sought by all human beings for Kant, is refused, according to Bourdieu, by those who do not want to be part of a common shared by all but on the contrary escape from it to affirm their superiority. Taking into account the sensitive relationship of the individual to the world, and in particular the emotions he conveys, also leads to a re-examination of Kantian disinterest.

These observations lead us to keep Kant's fundamental element to define taste as a subject-object relationship while broadening his approach to make the subject no longer an abstract being but a socialized individual or group, in search of aesthetic, hedonistic and ethical satisfactions, bearing interests, material and symbolic, determined, in the context of market and capitalist relations.

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