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Revitalising the Sociology of Taste

The study of taste and cultural consumption in sociology is currently a dynamic field. While sociologists have long maintained an interest in taste, consumption, and lifestyle (Simmel 1957; Shils 1960; Weber 1978; Veblen 2007) it has only been since the publication of Bourdieu's *Distinction* (1979 and 1984 in English) that sustained momentum of scholarship, comparative analysis, and a substantive empirical program of research in the field has emerged internationally. Indeed the field has recently enjoyed an excellent measure of substantive scholarship, various replications of Bourdieu's empirical work, and extensive comparative analysis and output. For all this momentum however, scholarship in this field is wedded to a somewhat narrow conceptual and empirical agenda associated with the determining impact of class and other stratification variables on taste and cultural practice. The consequence of this narrow agenda is the exclusion of a range of sociologically interesting variables that have been shown to have considerable importance in other sociological fields such as identity, politics, and interaction. Despite a few examples, little has been written about gender, sexuality, ethnicity, ageing, or religion, yet replications of Bourdieu's work in societies outside of France (Peterson, Simkus 1992; Peterson, Kern 1996; Bennett et al 1999; Bennet *et alii* 2009) have produced empirical findings that are problematic for stratification models, suggesting implicitly that other aspects and attributes of individual identity might shed light on the distribution of taste and cultural practice in contexts of late (Giddens 1990) or reflexive (Beck *et alii* 2003) modernity. In this paper I introduce an alternative conceptualisation and theoretical model of taste and cultural preferences based on Elias and Dunning's (1986) concept of 'mimetic leisure'. Primarily this model seeks to sensitise the impact of religion on taste and cultural consumption, however I contend that Elias and Dunning's concept can be used to revitalise a theoretically inert field through its application to other empirical patterns such as the omnivore. The paper also presents an exploratory operational model for empirical investigation.

A brief overview of taste and cultural consumption research in sociology

Stratification and class models are by far the dominant theoretical and conceptual models of explanation and interpretation in the field of taste and cultural consumption in sociology. Almost all of the extant literature in the field employs this theoretical approach in some form. These models emanate from the seminal work of Pierre Bourdieu, whose *Distinction* has made an enormous contribution to the sociological value of studying taste, lifestyle and culture. To summarize all too briefly¹ Bourdieu's theoretical and empirical work on taste and cultural

¹ Space does not permit a considered review of Bourdieu's theoretical scheme which it deserves. Readers are advised to consult a range of

consumption suggests culture is consumed as a symbolic resource that is used in a strategic manner in struggles to maintain status and class position within societies. The scholarly focus in this scheme is fixed on conceptions of 'legitimate' or 'high brow' culture and how competence with it confers 'cultural capital' which is used to secure other forms of capital such as economic capital. Consumers consume in line with their class status across various 'fields' of culture, according to Bourdieu, in which there exist hierarchies of legitimacy and taste that correlate neatly with the social and economic classifications of a nation such as France, a phenomenon Bourdieu terms 'homology' (1984). Bourdieu thereby reveals the social and economic utility of culture within society and how its consumption and the demonstration of competence with culture is deeply related to the class structures of contemporary societies.

Recent studies that have sought to replicate the conceptual and theoretical structure of *Distinction* outside of France through empirical enquiry have found a lack of empirical support for some elements of Bourdieu's theoretical position however². Emergent patterns of cultural consumption and taste display suggest factors such as age, gender, and ethnicity (Bennett *et alii* 1999; Bennett 2009; Katz-Gerro 1999) have an important role in the distribution of taste. Among other patterns of cultural consumption, Peterson and Simkus's (1992) identification of the cultural 'omnivore' where individuals display non exclusivity in taste preferences by indicating favour for not only 'high brow' but 'middle' and 'low brow' forms, especially with regard to music, is an empirical pattern found in many national contexts. While there is some contestation over Bourdieu's conceptual scheme there is also continuing empirical support for it in some quarters. Class and economic factors do certainly continue to impose considerable divisions in cultural consumption in some areas. However the all encompassing scope of Bourdieu's scheme has to some extent not held over time and through change to reveal large explanatory gaps left by the empirical enquiries that have followed his lead. The result of subsequent research is that class and economic factors do not entirely determine cultural taste, opening the field to other influences and conceptual schemes.

Religion and the problem of conceptualisation

It is in this light that religion, as well as other factors, should be considered of possible interest to a more open and less economically determined field of enquiry. One of the intellectual challenges of non class based enquiries is the construction of appropriate conceptualisation, theoretical reorientation and revitalisation of cultural consumption and taste to properly accommodate alternative influences. A theoretical consequence of the dominance of class and economic factors in taste and cultural consumption research has been a neglect of alternative conceptualisations of culture facilitating the exploration of taste formation produced by social factors other than class. Extant analyses are largely limited to "high", "middle", and "low brow" or "elite" and "mass/popular" conceptions. To reiterate, culture, within these models, is theoretically reduced to a kind of economic and social instrumentality: i.e. the only reason one consumes it is to achieve a better social and economic position. Some newer conceptual approaches such as the "omnivore"/"univore" (Peterson, Kern 1996) or the "inclusive"/"restricted" (Bennett *et alii* 1999) cultural consumer, challenge the straightforward homology between class and taste groups with taste formations entailing preferences from all levels of the traditional "high" "middle" and "low" scheme as opposed to the "high brow snob" (Peterson, Simkus 1992). Yet the sociological study of cultural consumption and taste continues to be dominated by economic models of culture that reduce taste to something that is overwhelmingly determined by class position.

Notwithstanding the important insights of the class based models of cultural taste, religion is essentially a different kind of concept. Against the established tendency to treat culture as a symbolic resource in economic and

studies and secondary sources that give an impressive and informative overview of Bourdieu's theories such as *Pierre Bourdieu* by Richard Jenkins 2003. Readers interested in replications of Bourdieu's work on taste are advised to consult *Accounting for Taste* (Bennett *et alii* 1999), and *Culture, Class, and Distinction* (Bennett *et alii* 2009).

² It should be noted that the data for *Distinction* was collected in France during the 1960's.

stratification struggles, here I highlight the expressive elements of culture. By this I mean culture's pleasurable, emotional, and permissive aspects that feature in the cultural consumption decisions of individuals (Featherstone 1990). I highlight religion as a special and potent aspect of cultural structure (Alexander, Smith 1993). This conceptualisation of culture emphasises "intrinsic" over "use" or "exchange" value and may not have any overt social or economic effects (Simmel 1997; Sayer 2000) such as the uses of culture in securing economic advantages through "cultural capital" (Bourdieu 1984) but may evidence symbolic moral boundaries in social life (Lamont 1992) revealing how institutional religion continues to be of importance in late modernity and how culture is subject to not only class based judgements but moral evaluation.

Norbert Elias and process sociology: prospects for the sociology of taste

Given the rapid emergence of cultural consumption as a field of study since Bourdieu's *Distinction: a Social Critique on the Judgement of Taste*, Elias' theoretical approach may provide researchers with a useful alternative to class and stratification models to better explain the emergence of factors other than class influencing taste formation and the distribution of culture. Additionally, empirical investigations associated with the current "cultural turn" in sociology including studies of taste, might benefit from Elias' approach by examining alternative "readings" or interpretations of culture other than the political which emphasise "decorative" narratives of domination and oppression in cultural production and consumption (Rojek, Turner 2000).

Elias' inquiries into leisure (Elias, Dunning 1986) provide researchers with a framework in which alternative models of taste and cultural consumption might be usefully conceptualised through examining culture as a source of emotional arousal and pleasurable tension in contrast to the emotional restraint enacted in everyday lives around routines of work and spare time. These pleasures are attended by restraints in a process Elias calls a "controlled decontrolling of the restraint of the emotions" (Elias, Dunning: 96). I interpret this process as a moral discourse on culture based on the view that culture can be coded as "good" or "bad", "harmful" or "harmless". Recent studies of taste have highlighted the potential of Elias' theories for such a re-conceptualisation of culture by suggesting his work to be useful in the delineation of the "moral codes of interpersonal conduct" that actors use in response to other people or "sociability" when defining good and bad tastes through concepts such as "civility" and "attunement to others" (Woodward, Emmison 2001: 295). In a departure from the economic and class models of culture the Australian researchers found that "in many instances everyday judgements of taste are not only understood as a question of aesthetics but that they are also matters of moral, ethical and communal sensibility" (Woodward, Emmison 2001: 296-297). These findings suggest two things: (i) religion is afforded a theoretical space within studies of taste and culture and (ii) that beyond class and stratification distinctions taste has a moral dimension. It is through the communal and interactive aspect of taste where Elias and Dunning's model can revitalise the study of cultural consumption.

The Civilising Process inverted: sport and leisure

Despite a discussion of how the civilizing process is extended through the historical development of sport, the general theory of leisure derived by Elias with Eric Dunning in *Quest for Excitement: Sport and Leisure in the Civilizing Process* suggests leisure's function to be contrary to models of civility that are a feature of the historical social and emotional development of Western societies. According to Elias and Dunning (1986: 15), the "principal function [of leisure (or culture)] appears to be the arousal of pleasurable forms of excitement" (compare with Bourdieu's notion of "cultural capital" deployed strategically in class struggles). Leisure is therefore a means to escape for a time the "routinization that a civilizing process engenders" (Elias, Dunning 1986: 16). Sport and leisure are functionally defined essentially as a "controlled decontrolling of restraints on emotions" (Elias, Dunning 1986: 96) and are "complementary to the control and restraint of overt emotionality in our ordinary life" (Elias, Dunning

1986: 66) In this way they counter the threat of life in “civilized” societies becoming too dull and can be seen as an “inversion” of the civilizing process or as a means of “de-civilizing” (Wouters 1986; Elias 1996).

This “inversion” of the civilizing process through leisure is really only a feature of one particular, but very important, mode of leisure – “mimetic leisure”. Elias and Dunning highlight it in the formulation of a general typology of “spare-time activities” away from work, of which only some are deemed to be “leisure” (1986: 95). They propose a theory of leisure within a “spare-time spectrum” (1986). Leisure is categorised into three broad divisions: 1) “spare-time routines”: attending to bodily needs such as drinking and washing, and routines associated with the house including cleaning, and other household administration; 2) “Intermediary spare-time activities of self fulfilment and self expansion” such as voluntary work, private study associated with occupation, and religious activities amongst others; and 3) “leisure activities” such as sociable activities, “mimetic” play and a residual category of miscellaneous activities (Elias, Dunning 1986: 98).

The three major categorical divisions within the “spare-time spectrum” are set off against what Elias and Dunning call “routines” which they define as “recurrent channels of action enforced by interdependence with others, and which impose upon the individual a fairly high degree of regularity, steadiness and emotional control in conduct and which block other channels of action even if they correspond better to the mood, the feelings, the emotional needs of the moment” (1986: 98). “Routines” can be viewed as the civilizing process applied to the daily activities and interactions of individuals that are to various degrees suspended through the practice of leisure. “Routines” are also a feature of many spare-time activities “classified under 1 [“spare-time activities”], less so those classified under 2 [“intermediary spare-time activities”], still less so those classified under 3 [“leisure activities”] (Elias, Dunning 1986: 98). A key dimension of “leisure activities” is “mimetic leisure”. Mimetic leisure, which from now on I term culture, is the focus of the rest of the chapter and informs the emergent model.

Mimetic Culture

Elias and Dunning’s “mimetic” culture is a concept borrowed from classical Greek philosophy formulated most substantively through the writings of Aristotle in a discussion about the function of drama, poetry, and music³. The term “mimesis” means to imitate. Mimetic culture according to Elias and Dunning, arouse emotions associated with the emotions of real life events. Mimetic cultures are not “representations of real life events but rather that the emotions - the affects aroused by them - are related to those experienced in “real life”, situations, only transposed in a different key, and blended by a “kind of delight”” (1986: 80).

This imitative or mimetic quality is a common characteristic of many types of culture traditionally conceptualised as “high” or “low” in many studies that employ class based models of taste formation (Elias and Dunning 1986: 80). For example a common feature of classical and rock music is the emotional arousal they produce through the imitation of the emotions experienced in real life events or situations. Here they share a common element that may account for a shared appreciation within taste formations usually termed “omnivorous” (Perterson and Kern 1996). Rather than simply conceptualised at opposite ends of a cultural taste hierarchy such as “high” or “low” the mimetic aspect to culture draws attention to different ways in which culture might be distributed through its function of emotional arousal. Individuals who favour forms of mimetic culture are therefore in search of a particular emotional response that might be governed not by economic or stratification concerns but discourses of pleasure and its control that have been traditionally framed as moral issues (Freud 1963; Foucault 1980).

Mimetic culture arouses all manner of emotions that one may or may not desire in real life such as joy, happiness, love, but also fear, anger, and hatred, in a pleasurable tension. The mimetic class of culture, report Elias and Dunning, entails an extensive array of activities, allowing one to

³ See Aristotle’s *Poetics* in which he considers culture such as drama and music in medical terms. Culture was purgative and curative of particular ailments of the soul: the arts as providing “catharsis”.

experience hatred and the desire to kill, defeating opponents and humiliating enemies. One can share making love to the most desirable men and women, experience the anxieties of threatened defeat and the open triumph of victory. In short one can tolerate, up to a point, the arousal of strong feelings of a great variety of types in societies which otherwise impose on people a life of relatively even and unemotional routines and which require a high degree and great constancy of emotional controls in all human relationships (1986: 125).

It is clear that mimetic culture arouses a range of emotions that may be perceived as “good” or “bad”, “harmful” or “harmless” based on standards of everyday civility entailing emotional restraint, illustrating quite clearly a neglected moral dimension to taste. This conceptualisation of culture emphasising emotionality opens up the possibility of examining the impact of factors such as religion on taste formation because mimetic culture, through its emotional arousal and pleasure, is subject to control through moral evaluation within broader social contexts of civility and socialization. Mimetic culture is set in relief to standards of “civility” in Elias’ scheme with varying degrees of control that strongly allude to its moral dimension. This moral dimension of mimetic culture is plainly evident in Elias and Dunning’s discussion of its nature (1986). Due to its function as a means to a “controlled decontrolling on the restraint of the emotions” (1986: 96) mimetic culture enables “people to ease or to tease the norms of their non leisure life” (Elias and Dunning 1986: 100). They involve “playing with norms” as one “plays with fire” apparently “without offending society” (Elias and Dunning 1986: 100).

But mimetic cultures have the potential for great offence and disruption to the order of complex societies however because “under the impact of strong feelings, [aroused by mimetic culture] people are apt to act in a manner which they themselves can no longer control” (Elias and Dunning 1986: 118). Therefore “a decisive characteristic of leisure activities” Elias and Dunning note, “is that the decontrolling of restraints on emotions is itself socially and personally controlled” (Elias and Dunning 1986: 96). The regulation or control of mimetic culture is performed in a number of ways that suggest a moral patterning of behaviour associated with mimetic culture as “good” and “bad”. “The way in which most societies couple the legitimization of sexual and other emotional satisfactions” write Elias and Dunning is, “within the framework of the family, with a socializing training, with beliefs, with direct restraints and prohibitions countering the dangers to others of any liberation of instinctual and emotional forces in a person” (1986: 119). Culture theorised as emotional pleasure affords a logical conceptual link to religion in taste formation because religion has historically facilitated the control of emotional pleasure in Western societies (Bell 1976). Of course class analysis can benefit from this model also as various regimes of restraint and refinement operate within Western class structures with their attendant institutions which can be matched to cultural choices.

An Eliasian model of the moral discourse of mimetic culture

<i>Civility</i>	→	Restraint on emotions, decreasing violence, aggression and the “animalic” in public life. Routines. “Thresholds” of decency, delicacy, shame, and embarrassment.
<i>Mimetic culture</i>	→	“Decontrolling of restraints on emotions” Pleasurable arousal of emotions “teasing of norms”
<i>Moral Discourse</i>	→	“Controlled decontrolling of restraints on emotions” through social institutions/self - family - socialisation - beliefs

Cultural civility and Cultural barbarism

While Elias and Dunning provide a general theory of culture in relation to processes of civility they do not provide an operational definition of mimetic culture informing taste formation and distribution incorporating the different modes or fields of culture expressed as genres, forms, or media sensitising influences such as religion. What is the relationship between civility, social institutions, and mimesis informing taste formation, distribution, and cultural practice? i.e. how can mimetic culture be operationalised within this theoretical scheme to capture and demonstrate variation in taste patterns? I contend that tastes in mimetic culture are formed through the level of control one has over the pleasurable decontrolling of emotions aroused by mimetic culture through various modes of socialisation and identity, of which religion is one. That is to say taste will be formed through an evaluation of the type of emotional pleasures that mimetic culture will be *perceived* to arouse indicative of a moral discourse. I use the term “control” here not only as a direct restraint on the emotions, which it is, but also as a channelling device through moral discourse allowing the arousal of particular types of emotions and providing a mechanism for participation in or preference for culture. This is an important distinction within the general function of mimetic culture as emotional arousal is profoundly variegated.

A key element of this contention then is the expressive elements of mimetic culture. What mimetic culture offers through content, mood, and form is a range of pleasurable emotional experiences that might range from hatred and anger through to calmness and well being. Mimetic culture is a way in which individuals can experience aggression, violence, and the animalic normally restrained in everyday life. Arousal of these emotions is engaging what moral dispositions associated with certain social institutions may express as the symbolically “barbaric”, the opposite of civility. In contrast mimetic culture may also serve to reinforce standards of civility by promoting the arousal of more “civil” or less violent and aggressive emotions such as peacefulness, calmness, pensiveness, and less exuberant forms of joy or sadness. These variations can be evaluated as “good” and “bad”, “harmful” and “harmless” through the moral discourse of control and are set off against general standards of civility that have been achieved through the civilizing process. Individuals act as “carriers” (Weber 1964; Alexander 2005) of perceptions about culture, such as “good” (civil) and “bad” (barbaric) learned through institutions such as religion that structure their choices. Crucial to this scheme, however is the notion of perception. It is not my contention that cultural forms such as musical genres, photographic subjects, or film genres are in and of themselves more or less “barbaric” or “civil”, only that they are perceived to be by those that do or do not consume them on account of their perceived or felt mimetic qualities through content, form, and style. It is the perception of cultural forms that individuals with particular attributes, associations, and experiences of socialisation, such as religion use, that structure tastes and cultural. Hence the impact of religion on taste and cultural consumption is theorised in moral terms relating to standards of civility and incivility associated with its role in European history, which according to Elias is as an agent of the civilizing process (Elias 1994). Of course moral evaluation of the kind I am discussing here in relation to taste most certainly exists for those who are not religious.

So what does mimetic culture consist of? The type of culture that comes under the description of mimetic is very broad. “Most, though not all, leisure activities belong to it” according to Elias and Dunning. “From sports to music and drama, from murder films, to Westerns, from hunting and fishing, to racing and painting, from gambling and chess, to swinging and rocking, and many others” (1986: 66). Within the specific modes or fields of mimetic culture are types or genres that carry variable mimetic qualities. For example music is a general field of mimetic culture but heavy metal and easy listening are two very different types of genres that through content and mood arouse very different emotions.

The “thresholds” of decency, delicacy, embarrassment and repugnance that Elias applied to manners should equally apply to mimetic culture through codified taste formations. We might expect heavy-metal music to break particular thresholds and easy listening to be well within them. Indeed government regulatory bodies such as the Office of Film and Literature Classification in Australia, informed by specialists and community representatives, regulate cultural expression in a similar process through codes indicating the level of violence, sex, nudity, and course language contained in cultural productions. Culture is to some extent controlled externally through clas-

sification informing individuals about the content usually with a letter rating such as “M” for “mature” and “C” for “children” (OFLC 2005).

I propose that cultural tastes be seen as reflecting a symbolic scheme of the thresholds and standards of decency and civility evaluated through moral discourse in the taste formations of individuals. In operationalising mimetic culture I highlight a key distinction in mimetic culture between “cultural civility” and “cultural barbarism”. What is culturally “civilized” or “barbaric” will reflect divergent and perceived standards of mimesis and emotional arousal based on attributes and affiliations such as religion. Cultural taste formation then reflecting a moral discourse can be coded as “cultural civility” and “cultural barbarism” on a scale of high to low. Below is a general typology of the moral discourse of culture as “cultural civility” or “cultural barbarism”.

A general typology of the moral discourse of mimetic culture

Mimetic Culture	The moral discourse about mimetic culture					
	Perceived Cultural Civility			Perceived Cultural Barbarism		
	High	Medium	Low	Low	Medium	High
Music						
Film						
Books						
Sport						
Leisure						
Photography						

Cultural civility and cultural barbarism can be thought of as essentially a continuum that entails two extremes, “high”, with more moderate states in between, “medium” and “low”. Importantly the model is exploratory and seeks to codify not the actual emotions aroused by various forms of mimetic culture but to position hypothetically the attitudinal judgements about mimetic culture based on the function of groups in relation to culture distinguished by various identity factors such as religion. The model offered here is a theory of how the system of mimetic culture may be perceived and evaluated by various groups in structuring taste based on culture as a form of emotional excitement. Religion is one such group. The model may equally apply to other social groups or experiences.

Civil and Barbaric cultures. A Religious model of cultural civility and cultural barbarism

In light of the proposed typology of the concept of mimetic culture perceived by actors as civil and barbaric a starting hypothesis is that religious individuals have different thresholds of delicacy and decency with regards to mimetic culture to non-religious individuals, thereby anticipating variance and difference in cultural taste patterns. In this section I refine the conceptual focus to the relationship between religion and culture and discuss why we might expect religious groups to have different thresholds of decency and delicacy to non-religious groups and propose an approximate religious model of cultural civility and cultural barbarism to forecast the structures of cultural civility and cultural barbarism between religious and non religious individuals. The discussion toward this end will comprise a consideration of the place of religion in the civilizing process.

Religion is a problematic area for processes of civilizing due to Elias’ deliberate focus on the secular upper clas-

ses of Europe in *The Civilizing Process*⁴. Sympathetic interpreters of his work have generally acknowledged that the omission of religion is an issue of concern for his general theory of civilizing processes. Bryan Turner states that “The absence of any sustained analytical interest in the regulative and restraining functions of religious norms in the historical process of civilizing military violence, the court and the bourgeois household is a significant problem in Elias’ treatment of the institutional matrix of Western nation-states” (2004: 251). In a similar vein Johannes Goudsblom declares that “there can be no doubt that what we now classify as religious forces have at times exerted a strong pressure towards socially induced self-restraint” (2004: 278).

Elias only makes a handful of scattered references to the role of religion in *The Civilizing Process*, his general position on the role of religion in it summarised thus: “Religion, the belief in the punishing or rewarding omnipotence of God, never has in itself a ‘civilizing’ or affect-subduing effect. On the contrary, religion is always exactly as ‘civilized’ as the society or class which upholds it” (1994: 169). Despite Elias’ denial that religion “in itself” is not a producer of the civilizing process he does afford it the role of an agent in the dissemination of behavioural models to other strata of society that emanated from the princely courts. “Clerical circles, above all”, Elias writes, “became popularisers of the courtly customs” (1994: 86) to the extent that “*civilité* was given a new Christian religious foundation” (1994: 87). Leading Elias to conclude that “the church⁵ proved, as so often, one of the most important organs of the downward diffusion of behavioural models” (1994: 87). Some evidence lending support to religion’s civilising role is available from social surveys. The leading response from a question about the most important thing for the church to provide from the Australian National Social Science Survey 1993 is “Encouragement of decent, respectable behaviour” (23.2%) and “Encouragement of good morals” (21.8%). Elias’ position on religion in the civilizing process has been compared with Weber’s parallel work on what Bryan Turner (2004) calls “the rationalization process” in a general theory of the development of Western societies. By contrast Weber of course places religion in the lead role in the development of the modern world of “sober bourgeois capitalism” by looking to the ethical foundations of Western rationalization, derived from the Catholic monasteries and applied to everyday life by Protestantism with specific consequences for economic conduct and everyday life in general. “When asceticism was carried out of the monastic cells into everyday life, and began to dominate worldly morality, writes Weber, “it did its part in building the tremendous cosmos of the modern economic order” (1967: 181).

Weber and Durkheim both believed that religion in itself had, through ascetic practices and beliefs, specific attributes that achieved and promoted self-restraint and control of the affects. For Durkheim this was present in the “moral community” founded in the rituals and doctrines binding individuals into a group that evaluated the world and all things in it as sacred or profane through the auspices of the “positive” or “negative” cult (1995). For Weber religion produced a particular “psychological vehicle” or habitus that produced an orientation toward the world, which in turn regulated conduct toward the aim of salvation (1967). Notwithstanding the debate about the specific influence of religion in the development of modern Western societies, all three of the great sociological theorists allocate to religion a role in the restraint of the emotions and logically therefore a special place in the regulation of culture. Marx and Engels (2002) were also of the opinion that religion produced an emotional pacifism that obstructed political action with the famous “opiate of the people” pronouncement. Moreover it is difficult to separate religion from the models of civility suggested by Elias that have developed through history irrespective of whether they were of a religious or secular derivation because of the role in which churches performed in social life, in all sections of society. In summary religion, as a means of “moral community” can be viewed as a sacralising force for civility, as Elias theorises it. It is only Weber however that discusses religion in relation to culture as a substantive issue. In his *Sociology of Religion* he conceptualises culture, particularly music, in much the same way as Elias conceptualises leisure in that its function primarily resides in the production of ecstasy, ecstasy toward religious goals however.

⁴ The notion of a “secular” upper class in Europe is intended to mean those classes who were not clergy or religious professionals. Indeed to suggest that there was a secular upper class in European society from the middle-ages is, according to certain meanings of “secular” somewhat ridiculous due to the place of Christianity in European social life. Many European monarchs are today still the earthly representatives of God and symbolic head of their various churches.

⁵ It is not clear whether Elias is referring here to the Catholic Church, which so often is written as simply “The Church” in European histories or if he meant any kind of Christian church, be it Catholic or Protestant.

Religion and art are intimately related in the beginning. That religion has been an inexhaustible spring of artistic expressions is evident from the existence of idols and icons of every variety, and from the existence of music as a device for arousing ecstasy... Religion has stimulated the artistic activities of magicians and sacred bards, as well as stimulating the creation of temples and churches... together with the creation of religious artefacts and church vessels of all sorts (Weber 1964: 242-243).

Yet through historical and social processes culture has increasingly gained independence from religious authority. Indeed Weber (1964: 243) acknowledges this development when he states:

But the more art becomes an autonomous sphere, which happens as a result of lay education, the more art tends to develop its own set of constitutive values, which are quite different from those obtaining in the religious and ethical domain.

As a result of this type of secularisation religion is then in a state of “tension” with art that represents an alternate mode of salvation as a result of the loss of direct control over the production of culture. Elias and Dunning also claim that many examples of mimetic culture have religious bases to them such as the Christian carnivals of the middle ages and the Dionysian festivals in ancient Greece (1986: 65), but “in contemporary societies... it is no longer a framework of religious activities and beliefs which provides scope for a balancing relaxation of restraints” (Elias and Dunning 1986: 66). One could, however, point to the ever increasing production of religious culture that does allow for a relaxation of restraints such as Christian rock music (Hager 2000). In recent times theorists such as Daniel Bell have also considered the relationship between religion and control as a substantive issue within a broad theory of social change. Bell (1976: 182) states that

In the history of Western society there has always been a dialectic of release and restraint. The idea of release goes back to the Dionysiac festivals, Bacchanalian revels... or to the examples in biblical legend and history of Sodom and Gomorrah or the Babylonian episodes... The great historic religions of the West have been religions of restraint. We find in the Old Testament an emphasis on the law, and a fear of human nature unchecked: an association of release with lust, sexual competitiveness, violence, and murder. The fear is the fear of the demonic – the frenzied ecstasy (ex-stasis) of leaving one’s body and crossing the boundaries of sin. Even the New Testament, which suspends the law and proclaims love, recoils from the mundane implications of the suspension of the law and erects a barrier.

While the religions of the West are generally thought of as religions of restraint when it comes to culture it cannot be said that the religious themselves do not seek a “decontrolling of the restraints of the emotions” in leisure however. They may simply not seek the “frenzied ecstasy of leaving one’s body and crossing the boundaries of sin” that they feel might be facilitated in specific forms of mimetic culture. Indeed religion provides this very outlet through parallel forms of culture available to the religious in contemporary societies such as Christian music, novels, and art. Elias’ theory of leisure applies to religious culture as much as it does to secular culture and the totalitarian impression of emotionally restrained religious groups may not be an accurate one. The greater majority of culture however, is secular, and not produced, nor consumed for that matter, to arouse ecstasy in religious contexts or for religious purposes⁶. Given this “ideal type” situation we may think that the religious may avoid the many forms of secular culture, as some more specialised religious groups do such as Hasidic Jews or the Amish. We must, however, consider lay religious actors in a predominately secular matrix of cultural expression and presume that religious individuals will unavoidably engage in secular culture but in a way that highlights the “tension” between religion and culture that Weber suggests and that the concept of mimetic culture offered here theorises.

That religion has acted to restrain cultural expression is beyond doubt. Historically this has been the area of censorship exerted by the state in association with religion to regulate standards of decency and limit obscenity in accordance with prescribed moral codes and standards (Bertrand 1978; Coleman 2000; Vnuk 2003), as it

⁶ These no doubt still exist. Indeed a direction of further research in cultural consumption could look at Christian leisure, particularly Christian rock and literature that is a multi million dollar industry in western countries.

still does in some countries. This model of public and institutional regulation has changed however and despite occasional appeals by the churches to ban particular items of culture from public consumption, churches do not occupy a position of political power any longer so as to be able to directly influence the cultural choices of individuals through political means (Dobbelaere 1981; Wilson 1982; Dobbelaere 2003). This does not mean that religion is not active in the structuring of taste cultures however, indeed it means that researchers need to analyse religion on a different level such as individual lay religious actors associated with such developments as the “privatization of religion” (Luckmann 1967).

The tenor of contemporary culture

Given the general secularisation and decline in direct institutional control of cultural production by religions, what in terms of the notions of cultural civility and barbarism can we say characterise the cultural systems of representation in contemporary Western societies? To assess religion’s probable impact on taste a few comments about the general expressive and emotional tenor of contemporary culture will be instructive.

It may be safe to assume that culture, in Western societies, has in recent history, coinciding with the decrease of religious authority and prolific social change, become more “barbaric”, increasingly permitting depictions of sex and violence across mimetic cultural fields⁷ (Thompson and Sharma 1998). Given this assumption, mimetic culture’s development could be seen to represent within process sociology, a “decivilizing process” or perhaps a “fluctuation” (Wouters 1986; 1989; Mennell 1990; Wouters 1991; Elias 1996).

As noted earlier it is important to discriminate between the various levels of application in which the theory of the civilizing process has been applied and where decivilizing processes can be traced. The present study differentiates between a civilizing process in the real life behaviour of individuals who through chains of interdependence in particular figurations will submit to “routines” as Elias and Dunning define them, and a decivilizing process on a cultural level that can be indicated by cultural production allowing a “controlled decontrolling of the restraint of emotions” that may or may not have any social effects. A rise in one direction may not necessarily indicate a decline in another.

Process sociologists, analysing the behaviour changes in the twentieth century, have also made claims of a process of “informalization” with regards to manners, language, and parental child relations. In moral terms informalization and decivilization have characterised the “permissive society” (Wouters 1977; 1986) or the “expressive revolution” (Parsons 1999). Both terms reveal the underlying moral dimension of the civilizing process and how changes in the opposite direction can be perceived and can assist in the derivation of hypotheses for alternative models of cultural consumption and taste.

On the symbolic level this decivilizing process or “permissive society” that might account for the rise in depictions of barbarism including particular renderings of sex and violence especially is, according to Daniel Bell a product of the decline of religious authority since the mid nineteenth century, in which culture “crossed over” from the “sacred to the profane” in a continuing “dialectic of release and restraint” in relation to what he terms “the demonic”. Bell (1976: 117) insists that:

The culture - particularly the emerging current we now call modernism - took over, in effect, the relation with the demonic. But instead of taming it as religion sought to do, the modernist culture began to accept the demonic, to explore it, to revel in it, and to see it (correctly) as the source of a certain type of creativity.

The current phase of decivilization or “permissiveness” in accordance with the decline in religious authority is a key aspect of contemporary mass media as Camille Paglia (1991: 45) asserts

⁷The political scientist and social commentator Robert Manne professed on SBS television that “I think that there is a lot of barbarism in popular culture of a kind which has been growing over the last 20 or 30 years...” (Insight 17/4/1997). No empirical studies, in process or any other sociological perspective, exist to state whether or not there was more barbarism in culture and leisure in the 1990’s than at other periods in the twentieth century.

Historiography's most glaring error has been its assertion that Judeo-Christianity defeated paganism. Paganism has survived in the thousand forms of sex, art, and now the modern media. Christianity has made adjustment after adjustment, ingeniously absorbing its opposition (as during the Italian Renaissance) and diluting its dogma to change with changing times. But a critical point has been reached. With the rebirth of the gods in the massive idolatries of popular culture, with the eruption of sex and violence into every corner of the ubiquitous mass media, Judeo-Christianity is facing its most serious challenge since Europe's confrontation with Islam since the Middle Ages. The latent paganism of Western culture has burst forth again in all its daemonic vitality.

It may well be assumed then that current standards in cultural expression are somewhat "barbaric" in comparison to previous ones. However this portrays culture as simply a one sided affair replete with representations of the "darker" aspects of human life. We should not overstate the influence on religion on any notion of cultural permissiveness either. Undoubtedly any rise in "barbaric" culture is a complex process of institutional and individual social, political, and cultural change but the broader point here is that religions have been a powerful restraint on behaviour including culture. Despite the indications that mimetic culture has undergone a decivilizing spurt many forms of culture exist that might be conceived as "civil", morally "acceptable", and well within particular thresholds of decency in that they limit the portrayals of barbarism indicated in mimetic culture by particular expressions of sex and violence. In any case various levels of mimetic representation exist within the universe of cultural output legitimating the type of analysis I am advocating here.

Situating religion in relation to mimetic culture, and society

Through historical social processes religion, culture and art have separated into separate realms and have often demonstrated a tension toward each other. How might this more general and amorphous thought translate into contemporary religious responses by individuals to secular culture and how might it be sociologically valid to think about and explain real differences between denominations and different levels of religious commitment and secular culture?

Max Weber's general notion of a "tension" between the realms of art and religion in the production of ecstasy is reminiscent of a general tension theorised to exist between religious groups of varying theological orientation and the broader secular society (Niebuhr 1957; Troeltsch 1931). This body of literature has emphasised the differences in religious sub-group values orientation, organisation, membership, and authority structure. A more contemporary version of religious tension with the wider social environment is presented by Stark and Finke (2000). These theories of religious differences may account for variation in cultural consumption between religious individuals belonging to different religious groups and levels of religious commitment indicating a level of tension between a religious group or level of commitment to a religion and the broader secular world indicated by cultural tastes.

In addition to thinking about religions and religiosity as being more or less in a state of tension with secular society, situating religion in terms of civility and barbarism within the civilizing process can assist us in stating how religion relates to this particular theoretical orientation. It has been contended that religion has acted as an agent or force for civility, reinforcing the particular thresholds of repugnance and delicacy that form behavioural models, extended to the formation of taste structures. Religious individuals as carriers of these standards draw from a cultural tool kit (Swidler 1986) and project these codes of civil and barbaric onto mimetic culture. We would expect then that religious individuals would seek to demonstrate more symbolic civility through taste than non-religious individuals. We would also expect variation in election and evaluation of cultural taste between different religious types in the form of denomination and various levels of religiosity.

Operationalising Mimetic cultural tastes

From an empirical perspective, what forms of mimetic culture might the religious perceive as representing cultural civility and cultural barbarism? Below is an approximation of how the model may inform the evaluation of mimetic culture of religious individuals through cultural choices. Figure 3 suggests a hypothetical model of the moral evaluation of cultural tastes based on religious identity factors. While the process sociological theory of leisure is a theory of interest to scholars, little has been written about the operationalisation of mimetic culture as a guide to the empirical investigation of taste preferences. Similarly the neglect of cultural consumption by sociologists of religion has left little in the way of guidance and or empirical support for moral classification of culture. The classifications below proceed within an exploratory framework. Despite the pronounced difficulties in measuring culture (Marsden and Swingle 1994; Emmison 1997; Katz-Gerro 2004; Bennet *et al* 1999) I outline a proposed scheme of mimetic cultural classification in Eliasian terms below to provide some preliminary sensitising to cultural civility and cultural barbarism that suggests how moral evaluation of mimetic culture could be developed in an empirical environment.

Cultural civility in music might include “softer” genres such as classical, light classical, easy listening and musicals. “Harder” genres such as rock, heavy metal, techno, and avant-garde music are coded to represent cultural barbarism. Subjects such as a vase of flowers, a sea sunset, and a wedding might indicate civility in photographic subjects as opposed to more violent scenes including the homeless fighting, a demolition site, and a car crash as barbaric because of the violence associated with such images. Civil reading tastes might include classical authors, poetry, romances, travel, gardening and cooking, while genres such as horror, science fiction, erotica, and crime, barbarism. War, horror, R or X rated, film noir, and independent films are coded as indicating barbarism; musicals, romances, dramas, and adventure films civility. Finally music leisure such as attending orchestral concerts, ballet, and musicals are coded to represent civility and attendance at night clubs, pubs with live bands, and rock concerts, barbarism. The approximation is essentially a creation that is not based on scholarly literature or on any specific religiously informed positions on the cultural fields which is simply non-existent to the greater majority of mimetic culture beyond its extreme forms.

A typology of the moral classification of mimetic culture: an approximation of how religious individuals structure cultural civility and cultural barbarism based on a selection of mimetic cultures

<i>Mimetic Domain</i>	<i>Civil</i>	<i>Barbaric</i>
Music leisure	Opera, ballet, orchestral concerts,	Rock concerts, night clubs, pubs/bars with live bands
Music	Classical, light classical, opera, easy listening, big band, folk, top 40 pop	Rock, alternative rock, blues, jazz, heavy metal, avant-garde, techno
Film	Comedies, musicals, romances, westerns, adventures, spectaculars	Horror, Pornography, Science fiction, war, film noir, thrillers
Literature	Classical authors, poetry, romances, educational, gardening, cooking, craft/hobbies, historical romances, travel	Crime, thrillers, contemporary novels, horror, occult, erotica, science fiction
Photographic subjects	Landscapes, vase of flowers, sunset over sea, wedding, horse in a field	Car crash, homeless fighting, demolition site, pregnant woman
Sport	Tennis, swimming, cricket, golf, basketball, netball	Motor racing, boxing, wrestling, rugby union, rugby league, football
Leisure	Surfing, swimming, cycling, walking, hiking, camping, gardening,	Martial arts, weight training, hunting, fishing.

Conclusion

This paper has suggested an alternative conceptual and theoretical scheme for the analysis of cultural consumption. Beyond the dominant class and stratification models Elias and Dunning's scheme has been introduced to link the concepts of religion and cultural consumption. The scheme however has the potential to revitalise the more established class and structural analyses by examining the emotional and expressive thresholds of various cultural production that inform class formation and belonging. In this light a key example of the scheme's utility is to shed light on the notion of the omnivorous consumer whose consumption patterns belie simple class related explanation. The more diffuse demonstration of tastes of the omnivore suggests that within the technological expanse of broadcasting and production cultural choice is perhaps accounted for by reference to individual emotional need and experience in addition to the social determinants of taste. Elias and Dunning's model considers the pleasurable as well as the social in a valid and accurate tension.

As an exploratory evaluative framework the model needs further qualification surrounding its evaluative classification of "civil" and "barbaric" to the extent that individual cultural items as well as genres need investigation and insight from such discipline specific fields such as musicology to assess mood, style and emotion to more accurately inform mimesis. Further research on subjective reactions to culture would also inform this scheme.

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