

Place of consumerism in new middle classes



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‘ What is the place of Consumerism in the lifestyle of emergent new middle classes in Ireland?’ Basically an application of a Bourdieu/ Featherstone argument about new middle classes to the Irish case.

Chapter One: Introduction

In order to examine the place of Consumerism in the lifestyle of emergent new middle classes in Ireland, the ideas of ‘ Consumerism’, ‘ lifestyle’ and ‘ emergent new middle classes’ must first be defined. Accordingly these definitions will occupy the preliminary discussions of this thesis in the relevant sections. The thesis will examine the role of emergent middle classes, and will attempt to tie this discussion to analysis of how and why demographic trends such as the emergence of new middle classes have evolved, and what place Consumerism has in the lifestyles of those individuals within these new demographic cleavages.

Economic events and socio-economic developments (both historical and contemporary) linked to these events have been the main precipitative forces responsible for these emergent sociological contours ^[i] . The economic and socio-economic climate in Ireland and how this has developed will therefore be a centre point in examining the role of emergent new middle classes and how Consumerism has impacted the role and lifestyle of these sectors.

These ideas will be introduced in the literature review and they will be fleshed out throughout the thesis in order to gain a holistic and comprehensive insight into the place of Consumerism in the lifestyle of emergent new middle classes in Ireland. This analysis will be contextualised

with reference to the theories of Bourdieu (1979) and Featherstone (1992) whose cultural perspectives on society have mainly rationalised Consumerism in terms of subjectivity and individual perceptions; therefore repudiating the idea that Consumerism is simply an objective, independent market force which operates within neo-classical ^[ii] and laissez-faire ^[iii] boundaries. Images of Irish society will be very important in this thesis and the images/themes which will be examined throughout the thesis to facilitate this discussion of Consumerism are images of secularisation, images of Class Dealignment, images connected with the Celtic Tiger and the process of diversification.

The next section will examine the methodology of the thesis. This will link the above mentioned theoretical definitions, arguments and analysis into the wider empirical and qualitative aims of the thesis. The chosen methodology is discourse analysis, and turning to a discussion of the definition of what exactly this is, is a natural progression. Accordingly, this discussion of definition will follow in the next section. The next section will also introduce the methodological framework of the thesis. It will define the various applications and forms of discourse analysis and it will explain how these will be considered throughout the thesis.

Chapter Two

Methodology: Discourse Analysis

This thesis will rely primarily upon empirical evidence gathered through discourse analysis. The writer has selected a number of cultural themes from selected publications and these will be examined empirically and through discourse analysis. These are diversification ^[iv] (both political and cultural), <https://assignbuster.com/place-of-consumerism-in-new-middle-classes/>

images of Class Dealignment, images of secularised society and the imputations which arise from the phrase ‘ Celtic Tiger ^[v] ’. These will be looked at in depth as the thesis progresses, and will be placed within the context of wider themes of economic, political and socio-economic factors which the writer will also examine in terms of broad and contextual discourse analysis.

Discourse analysis is an interdisciplinary ^[vi] method of analysing sociological trends ^[vii] through the analysis of language ^[viii] and speech ^[ix] , and how political ideas are disseminated through language ^[x] . This method will be used throughout the dissertation as a means of analysing the place of Consumerism in the lifestyle of emergent middle classes.

Discourse analysis has been differentiated and divided into niche areas in terms of its application. For example, discourse analysis may be used on a micro scale which would involve minute analysis of grammatical structure ^[xi] , language and the composition ^[xii] of language ^[xiii] . This is not a method which will be concentrated upon in this thesis, as the more expansive niches within discourse analysis, which concentrates upon context ^[xiv] and cultural, political and other sociological forces are more appropriate ways to analyse the question title. This is because the concentration of discourse analysis in terms of wider context ^[xv] and a focus on specifically identified themes rather than minute form ^[xvi] and constructions ^[xvii] gives the writer a lot more room to analyse political, cultural, sociological, demographic and economic trends, which is the ultimate goal of this thesis enquiry.

Chimombo, M. and Roseberry, R. (1998) give us the following in depth definition of discourse analysis:

‘ Discourse is a process resulting in a communicative act. The communicative act itself takes the form of a text. A text is commonly thought of as consisting of written or printed words on a page; but a text may also consist of sign language or spoken words, or it may comprise only the thoughts of a writer, or speaker, on the one hand, or a reader or listener, on the other. In addition to words, a text may consist of other symbols, sounds, gestures, or silences, in any combination that is intended to communicate information such as ideas, emotional states, and attitudes. It may fail to communicate, but if the intention to communicate is clearly there, it must be regarded as a text..... [xviii] ’.

Chimombo, M. and Roseberry, R. (1998) then go on explain how this abstract definition applies within the context of methodology:

‘ Analysis of discourse is a methodology for examining texts and the communicative process that gives rise to them. Its primary purpose is to enable discourse analysts to gain a deeper understanding and appreciation of texts. Because most texts are goal oriented, part of the purpose of discourse analysis is to enable people to recognize the intended goal of the writer or speaker and thus achieve some measure of control over the discourse..... The understanding that may be gained in this way helps to equalize the power relationship and enables an escape from the role of victim such that individuals may assume a greater degree of control over their lives. This book demonstrates that discourse is typically used to a

greater or lesser degree for exploitation. Different types of discourse are intended to exploit consumers, voters, employees, children, women, minorities, and many other groups within society. An ability to analyze discourse offers such groups a means of protection.... [xix] ,

A discourse is therefore an amalgam of perspective. These perspectives are often political, economic or ideological in nature, since the articulation of a perspective through discourse is often underpinned by struggles for political power and influence [xx] . This in turn imputes that a discourse has a special connection with politics and with economics and that cultural discourses have often been appended to these primary discourses. Chimombo, M. and Roseberry, R. (1998) make this point very strongly in the following passage:

‘.... The term control implies a power relationship between those who produce texts and those for whom these texts are intended. For example, politicians, lawyers, doctors, advertisers, business executives, teachers, and many others exercise power over their clients through the discourse that is characteristic of these professionals. Analysis of professional discourse can reveal these power relationships and the goals that may be hidden in them. [xxi] ,

Cultural discourses may also be seen as having evolved indirectly from political, economic and ideological discourses [xxii] . A cultural discourse may therefore be rationalised as secondary in many ways to a political/ideological and to an economic discourse. However, it is important to understand that cultural discourses often exist within the framework of these arguably more

primary discourses ^[xxiii] . Also, one must remember that an analysis of cultural discourse, without an adequate analysis of the wider context of the discourse and its relationship with other discourses will not be a credible analysis. The writer's regard for a cultural discourse as a secondary discourse is an explanation of how cultural discourse has evolved; it is not intended to demarcate cultural discourse as less relevant than political, economic or ideological discourse. Clearly, cultural discourses have qualified and enriched these wider, politically tuned discourses and this in itself is a unique and powerful mechanism of change.

This explains the central nature of wider political discourse analysis in this thesis and it also explains why Fairclough (1995) ^[xxiv] in particular has argued that discourse analysis centres on the interpretation of political and ideological discourses. It is important to remember however that cultural discourse analysis is intertwined with these primary discourses in a subtle but imperative way.

The following chapters will deal with definitions of lifestyle and consumerism. They will also introduce a general discourse analysis which will centre on the selected themes mentioned above and how they ultimately relate to politics, economics, and the demographic and sociological trends which have been emerging in Ireland over the last twenty years ^[xxv] . The concept of emergent middle classes will be defined in the following chapters also and this definition will lead into a broad and contextual discourse analysis of how middle classes emerged in Ireland. The effects of this emergence will be discussed, but all of these threads of analysis will ultimately be drawn

together to look at the place of Consumerism in the lifestyle of emergent new middle classes in Ireland, and the arguments that have been made in this area by Bourdieu (1979) and Featherstone (1992).

Chapter Three: Literature Review:

What is ‘ Consumerism’?

Clarke (2003) gives us the following definition and explanation of Consumerism within the context of culture:

‘.... Bauman (1992c, 24) reflects that the strange ‘ dialectic of dependence and autonomy’ between consumer and consumer society is indeed ‘ not unlike that of the grammar and vocabulary of language and formed sentences of speech: the latter are in no way “ determined” by the former and move freely within the frame it provides’. The practice of consumption amounts, in other words, to an act of enunciation, which takes place in ‘ a space filled with unattached signifiers ... a space awaiting attribution of meaning’ (ibid.). The consumer is in no way manipulated, nor consumer behaviour ‘ determined’, even though the consumer is formally deprived of autonomy in all forms but the duplicitous form of freedom of choice. The proliferation of relations of trust, the reliance on specialist knowledge and expertise, and the privatization of the task of constructing some form of continuity of life-experience are unavoidable features of life in a consumer society. But consumers are nonetheless in a position to make of their situation something other than what is intended. The problem, however, is that, as an ‘ act through which the presence of the individual ... can be confirmed and reasserted’ (ibid.), consumption and the relations of trust it

entails provides an opportunistic means for the perpetuation – and dramatic expansion – of capitalism..... [xxvi] ,

Therefore, as has been argued above, Consumerism is a term which describes the links between happiness, material goods/possessions and humans [xxvii] . It can be argued that Consumerism refers to the idea that material goods and possessions induce feelings of happiness and accordingly all behaviours which may be linked to the endorsement of this rationale may also be described as Consumerism [xxviii] . Consumerism is an idea which was considered by Karl Marx [xxix] , whose famous critique of Consumerism and capitalist ideology (Communism [xxx]) interpreted ideas of Consumerism as immoral and subversive [xxxi] .

In modern terms Socialism rejects ideas related to Consumerism in a more moderate way, but the premise upon which Socialism is built mirrors Communism in its suspicion of Consumerism [xxxii] . Consumerism may also be described in terms of economic behaviour and policy. If one considers Consumerism in an abstract manner, it is possible to argue that the freedom of individuals to choose how to spend money/dissipate resources manifests itself as Consumerism, since the marketing of goods to a consumer encourages them to exercise their freedom to choose what to purchase. Clarke (2003) has noted that this is an ongoing and repetitive process: ‘ The act of consumption is destined to repeat itself, since the human subject is irresistibly compelled to seek a unity and coherence it can never know... [xxxiii] ,

Ideas relating to Consumerism have traditionally been associated with Western societies and have also been particularly synonymous with neo-liberal capitalism. However, it may be argued that with the growing influence of globalisation and technological advancements, the impact of Consumerism is a global one as opposed to the more traditional interpretation of Consumerism as being tied particularly to certain cultures, more so than to others. Ultimately, however, Consumerism is connected to the ideas of human rationality, freedom and choice and has evolved as a means whereby human wants are satisfied. Accordingly, Consumerism may also be seen as a sociological force since, the recognition of social standings within society can be defined in many ways according to material wealth and the accumulation of material possessions.

Consumerism is a complex idea which may be interpreted objectively as well as subjectively. This characteristic of Consumerism has invited the levels of cultural, sociological and economic analysis which the theory of Consumerism seems to have attracted. Therefore, the evolution of Consumerism and the various interpretations of the current status of Consumerism will be relevant to this thesis. Consumerism; its construction and its manifestation can be seen to oscillate with cultural mores and the development of society. This is how Consumerism may also be seen as an evolving social construct.

Certainly Bourdieu (1979), Lash and Urry (1994) as well as Baudrillard (1993) consider Consumerism as a malleable social construct ^[xxxiv], which has developed mostly as a result of the growing economic affluence ^[xxxv] which

may be seen in Ireland ^[xxxvi] . Their views are that class is demarcated in terms of taste, culture and lifestyle ^[xxxvii] , whereas historically this demarcation was less obvious since economic limitations precluded individuals from expressing taste, culture and lifestyle in the diverse ways that are possible today. Their analysis goes on to argue that Consumerism is the vehicle through which this transition has taken effect, since diversities in taste, culture and lifestyle have largely been introduced through the marketing of Consumerism and consumerist values. Therefore the accessibility of diversity to individuals has increased as economic conditions and Consumerism have delivered more choice to the individual.

Emergent New Middle Classes

‘ Middle classes’ is a somewhat overused term. It has historically been used to differentiate the economically disadvantaged within society from those whose incomes and resources provide them with enough money to live independently and relatively affluently within society, generally occupying the middle ground between rich and poor within society. The emergent new middle classes that are referred to in the scope of this thesis can be recognised as the product of an increasingly affluent society within Ireland ^[xxxviii] , emerging as more individuals benefit from the higher standards of living that may be seen as a result of what is colloquially known as the Celtic Tiger ^[xxxix] .

Cronin (2000) has an analysis of individual cultural consciousness which allows us to interpret the emergence of middle classes in a purely cultural and subjective context. He argues:

‘ Diprose (1994) states that the Lockean model defines the individual as an entity which maintains the same consciousness over time and through corporeal changes, for example illness or pregnancy, thus giving primacy to the mind or consciousness over the body. Further more, the individual is defined as having identical self-presence in which, ‘ an entity is identical with itself if it has the same origin in time and space’ (Diprose 1994: 9). So the individuation necessary for the processes of mutual recognition to occur requires a temporally bounded entity. Simultaneously, the individual is spatially bounded through the distinction between self and not-self which is produced in that same process of recognition. Here arises the constitutive contradiction of contract, identical self-presence and exchange: in these political fictions, the individual is said to have a self-contained identity prior to contract or relations with others (Diprose 1994). Pateman’s (1988) analysis of the contradictory production of women’s and subordinate groups’ status in contract echoes this tension. For the processes of contractual exchange to occur, an individual must recognise another as an individual. The characteristics that this requires are rationality and the possession of property..... [x] ‘.

Therefore, it is arguable that the emergence of new cleavages of middle classes in Ireland has arisen both through a combination of objective, market forces combined with the forces which drive individual self-perception and this in turn drives an individual to represent themselves and ultimately project this representation.

Chapter Four:

Discourse Analysis of Economic Growth in Ireland

The development of the economy in Ireland ^[xli] has created unprecedented ^[xlii] levels of wealth ^[xliii] and affluence ^[xliv] within Ireland ^[1]. Accordingly this section will specifically examine the nature and underpinnings of economic progress in Ireland as this has largely given rise to ^[xlv] and sustained ^[xlvi] emergent new middle classes as the Consumerism which has evolved alongside these sectors.

Economic growth in Ireland may be explained in terms of ideological transition ^[xlvii], the influence of the European Community ^[xlviii] and the influence of political leaders ^[xlix] throughout this period of economic transition ^[i]. Macro economic convergence theories ^[ii] may also help explain the shifts in economic conditions seen in Ireland ^[iii]. These factors are given more in depth analysis below.

The decline of state interventionism and state protectionism ^[liii] in Ireland led to palpable ideological shifts within the country ^[liv]. In an international setting, the ideological foundations of the welfare state ^[lv] were being replaced with more modern neo-liberal ^[2] conceptions of political philosophy ^[lvi]. This trend was particularly notable in Britain with the election of Margaret Thatcher and her subsequent repudiation of Keynes' economic ^[lvii] theory ^[lviii]. These ideological shifts, which influenced Ireland ^[lix], (although not until many years later) partly laid the foundations for the economic revolution ^[ix] which was to come about in the mid-nineties ^[lxi].

Charles Haughey who had been in power periodically since 1979, was re-elected Taoiseach in 1987, during a deep economic recession ^[lxii].

Haughey's predecessor in 1987 was G. Fitzgerald. These two individuals are widely recognised as having laid the foundations for economic stability in the Republic of Ireland, with a recognition that taxation needed to be reorganised to stimulate economic enterprise and growth. Consequently, under Haughey public spending was decreased and spending on public sector employment and bureaucracy was also reduced ^[lxiii]. This produced a dividend in the form of economic stability, lower levels of inflation and relatively rejuvenated economic growth. Again this affected employment conditions, reducing unemployment and creating the conditions for investment in enterprise. Tax cuts were then directed at the manufacturing industries ^[lxiv], and later tax breaks for particular sectors of industry augmented these economic dividends in the form of a stimulated economy and greater levels of employment. These economic conditions led to a reduced reliance on agricultural enterprise ^[lxv] and this is known as 'economic diversification' ^[lxvi].

The relationship between Ireland and the European Community and Ireland's accession to the European Community in the early 1970s marked a high point politically ^[lxvii], culturally and economically ^[lxviii] for Ireland ^[lxix]. However, the influence of the European Community on the situation of Ireland is a controversial area of debate at the moment ^[lxx]. Some have argued that the influence of the European Union has been instrumental in the growth of Ireland's economy ^[lxxi], whereas conversely there are

arguments which suggest that the role of the European Community has been over stated, misunderstood and even misrepresented ^[lxxii] . Both propositions will be considered by the writer in following sections.

The theory that Ireland prospered due to entry to the European Community has been critiqued as a facile theory ^[lxxiii] and this argument may be seen as even more cogent given that Powell (2003) has argued that if Ireland had prospered due to entry to the European Community, then the effects of EC investment would be identifiable and tangible. The reality is that European investment in Ireland produced some economic benefits, but the prosperity which Ireland enjoyed was precipitated by a plethora of events and shifts, which cumulatively produced the effects known as the Celtic Tiger ^[lxxiv] . One such shift is known as the convergence theory and economic growth in Ireland has been rationalised in terms of the convergence theory in the following way.

This theory suggests that the ‘ Celtic Tiger’ was not precipitated by circumstances, affiliations (in particular to the European Community) or events, but rather by the operation of a group of economic forces which argues that over time similar countries with similar institutions tend to perform economically in a congruous way. In this sense, the Celtic Tiger has been rationalised as a convergence as opposed to a phenomenon.

Historically, this theory is plausible, as Ireland was dogged by recession in spite of entry into the EEC in 1973, under the tenure of Jack Lynch ^[lxxv] . This recession continued until the advent of Charles Haughey, and G. Fitzgerald who addressed the failing tax system in the Republic of Ireland ^[lxxvi] .

The conception of taxation had been fundamentally challenged and revised in Ireland over the last twenty years ^[lxxvii] . This shift led to the realisation of the above mentioned ideological ideas substantively and not just rhetorically. The mid eighties in Ireland was a period characterised by high taxation and low employment ^[lxxviii] . Taxation was regarded as a method of bolstering the economy ^[lxxix] ... This had an adverse effect of investment, thwarted business and led to high levels of unemployment ^[lxxx] . In many ways this is what thwarted the progress of the economy, forcing class alignment along economic lines. Powell (2003) has argued that just prior to the millennium GDP in Ireland was \$25, 500 per capita, whereas in Britain this figure was approximately \$23, 000 per capita. This can be contrasted with the fact that in the late 1980s GDP per capita in Ireland was only approximately 65%, that of the UK GDP per capita ^[lxxxii] . This economic revolution has been referred to in colloquial and cultural terms as the growth of the ‘ Celtic Tiger’.

The use of the term Celtic Tiger is of great significance and it may be rationalised in terms of cultural symbolism in the following way:

‘ Human encounter with the world has always been a profoundly enigmatic affair. Traditionally, human societies attained a measure of ontological security from social arrangements that accepted the fundamental ambivalence of the world (Giddens 1990; 1994). Because traditional modes of existence were symbolically tied to the world of appearances, such societies were able to employ well established, ritualized ways and means of being-in-the-world... ^[lxxxii] ’.

The effects of cultural symbolism may be further delved into through examining this explanation of existence and illusions which are imparted through the ‘ appearance of things’:

‘ The continuity of such an existence was assured by the experience of tradition alone, and legitimated by forces beyond human powers. ‘ Nature ... in the infinite detail of its illusory manifestations ... was conceived above all as the work of hidden wills’ (Bloch 1962, 83). This world of illusion amounted, in other words, to an acceptance of the illusion of the world (the term ‘ illusion’ is apt ‘ not in the sense of its power to fool you, but in its power to put something into play, to create something: scene, space, a game, a rule of the game – to invent, in fact, the mode of appearance of things’ (Baudrillard 1993b, 59-60)). Modernity, in stark contrast, was founded firmly on the disavowal of the fact that ambivalence is inevitable; that appearances are intrinsically deceptive. Modernity was founded on a commitment to the reality of the world (Bauman 1991). Modernity thus held out the dream of an attainable order. And order, as the promise of the removal of ambivalence and contingency from the world, necessarily cast contingency as a threat, and demonized ambivalence. This was, of course, a complex and multifaceted affair. It involved, for instance, a transformation of time, as time became ‘ the property of man’ (Le Goff 1980, 51)... [lxxxiii] ‘.

Therefore the concept of a tiger married to the concept of ‘ Celtic’ and Celticness [lxxxiv] conveys, in metaphorical terms the speed and the pervasiveness of the new found wealth which swept through Ireland in the mid nineties, changing and fuelling market forces such as Consumerism. This

terminology ^[lxxxv] is relevant in cultural terms since it conveys the prosperity which pervaded Ireland during this period, and continues to drive the Irish economy as one of the wealthiest countries in the European Union ^[lxxxvi] .

This led to a dramatic shift in cultural mores and led to a redefining of class boundaries. The term ‘ Celtic Tiger’ also cast Ireland in an advantageous light internationally, advertising the economic growth and success which the country was experiencing. This attracted foreign investment interest and raised the profile of Ireland internationally, as well as serving to extricate Ireland from the damaging and often distorted image of a country dependent on EEC funding and support.

Demographically, the influence of economic forces was also dramatic and widespread. More people were in employment in Ireland and this led to a surge in industry, investment and enterprise ^[lxxxvii] . The tourist and the service sector industries surged forward economically, changing the sociological and cultural contours of the Republic of Ireland. Small businesses expanded and more people built hotels, shops, restaurants and food outlets ^[lxxxviii] . This impacted upon the tourist industry which thrived as more people were attracted to visiting locations within Ireland that were more accessible and inviting ^[lxxxix] . This trend too had a knock on effect with more leisure facilities being built, and a general emphasis on regenerating services and facilities in the interests of attracting tourists