KEY IDEAS

LIFESTYLES

David Chaney

LIFESTYLES

In the modern world our lifestyle helps to define our attitudes and values as well as show our wealth and social position. This clearly written introduction to the concept of lifestyle offers a concise guide to how the term is used in sociological accounts to refer to this modern social form. *Lifestyles* explores how we should classify lifestyles, why they have become more important and what precisely constitutes a lifestyle.

Organised into four parts, the first places the development of lifestyles in the context of modern society, and shows how lifestyles and consumerism have generated a wide range of research on the use of consumer goods to distinguish identities. The second reviews the work of a number of social theorists who have attempted to explain the meanings of fashionable style in modern culture. The third explains the characteristic themes of lifestyles such as surfaces, selves and sensibilities, while the final part offers a view on the aestheticisation of everyday life.

By reviewing a wide range of published material, introducing central themes in the sociology of modern life, examining distinctive styles in social theory and offering its own original contribution to current debates, *Lifestyles* provides students with a much needed overview of this often misused term.

David Chaney is Professor of Sociology at the University of Durham.

KEY IDEAS
Series Editor: Peter Hamilton
The Open University

KEY IDEAS
Series Editor: PETER HAMILTON
The Open University, Milton Keynes

Designed to complement the successful *Key Sociologists*, this series covers the main concepts, issues, debates and controversies in sociology and the social sciences. The series aims to provide authoritative essays on central topics of social science, such as community, power, work, sexuality, inequality, benefits and ideology, class, family, etc. Books adopt a strong individual 'line' constituting original essays rather than literary surveys and form lively and original treatments of their subject matter. The books will be useful to students and teachers of sociology, political science, economics, psychology, philosophy and geography.

THE SYMBOLIC CONSTRUCTION OF COMMUNITY
ANTHONY P. COHEN, Department of Social Anthropology, University of Manchester
SOCIETY
DAVID FRISBY and DEREK SAYER, Department of Sociology, University of Manchester
SEXUALITY
JEFFREY WEEKS, Social Work Studies Department, University of Southampton
WORKING
GRAEME SALAMAN, Faculty of Social Sciences, The Open University, Milton Keynes
BELIEFS AND IDEOLOGY
KENNETH THOMPSON, Faculty of Social Sciences, The Open University, Milton Keynes
EQUALITY
BRYAN TURNER, School of Social Sciences, The Flinders University of South Australia
HEGEMONY
ROBERT BOCOCK, Faculty of Social Sciences, The Open University, Milton Keynes
RACISM
ROBERT MILES, Department of Sociology, University of Glasgow
POSTMODERNITY
BARRY SMART, Associate Professor of Sociology, University of Auckland, New Zealand
CLASS
STEPHEN EDGELL, School of Social Sciences, University of Salford
CONSUMPTION
ROBERT BOCOCK, Faculty of Social Sciences, The Open University, Milton Keynes
CULTURE
CHRIS JENKS, Department of Sociology, Goldsmiths' College
MASS MEDIA
PIERRE SORLIN, University of Paris III
GLOBALIZATION
MALCOLM WATERS, University of Tasmania, Australia
CHILDHOOD
CHRIS JENKS, Department of Sociology, Goldsmiths' College

LIFESTYLES

DAVID CHANEY

London and New York

First published 1996
by Routledge
11 New Fetter Lane, London EC4P 4EE

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada
by Routledge
29 West 35th Street, New York, NY 10001

This edition published in the Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2001.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book has been requested

ISBN 0–415–11718–6 (hbk)
ISBN 0–415–11719–4 (pbk)
ISBN 0-203-13746-9 Master e-book ISBN
ISBN 0-203-17864-5 (Glassbook Format)

This book is for Karina

Contents

Preface

This book is about the concept of lifestyle – how the term is used in sociological accounts to refer to what is seen to be a modern social form. More generally, how and why lifestyles are embedded in a broader theme of a culture of consumerism. I have chosen to tackle this task through three contrasting perspectives, each covered in a part of the book.

My reason for adopting this approacsh is given by the character of lifestyles. Social research would be a lot easier if the concepts we used stood for (or referred to) distinct, clearly specifiable entities. This is not, however, the normal case so it has become accepted that, particularly in modern societies, social concepts refer rather to 'families'. What I mean by this term is that a number of quite different things or processes are collected together by something they share to give a sense of common identity. That which is shared is usually both an institutional setting and a way of being expressed – a discourse. I will, through the contrasting perspectives of the first three parts, try make clear some of the family of things that the discourse of lifestyle includes.

In the first part I discuss how a sense of lifestyle has been formulated in relation to some primarily empirical accounts of the changing social

structures of modernity. In the second part I shift to a discussion of some social theories of the cultural changes of modernity and how a notion of lifestyle has been used in these accounts. In addition to reviewing the relevant literature I try to show the cultural implications of continual innovations in goods and services in mass society. Then in the third part I look more closely at the cultural form of contemporary lifestyles, showing how it tends to use characteristic themes and perspectives. While each of these parts can be read independently I believe that, cumulatively, they delineate a family likeness.

I argue throughout that a sense of a distinctive type of concern (the family that the notion of lifestyle refers to) is used, and has been used, reflexively by social actors. And thus in the modern era lifestyles have developed as projects that they invest with ethical and aesthetic significance. In the fourth and concluding part of the book I take up this aspect more directly through a discussion of how we can see people using lifestyles to, in a sense, design themselves.

This book is part of a broader project of work concerned with the culture of modernity, in particular the changing discourses and representations of collective identities – how we identify ourselves as similar to and different from others. I am less interested in trying to map the various styles of identity than to explore the politics of social knowledge, that is with how various vocabularies of social life express distinctive types of authority and identity. I am as always deeply appreciative of the intellectual culture of my department at the University of Durham, and especially the sympathetic interest of my friends and colleagues in the Sociology of Knowledge and Social Politics research group. In particular, my friends and colleagues Andy Bennett, Nick Ellison and Dick Hobbs have made helpful suggestions on the work in progress.

I have, in relation to previous books, acknowledged my very real appreciation of the stimulus and encouragement that Chris Rojek has provided as editor. He gave me the initial idea for this book and although he subsequently moved on he has continued to encourage and support the project unstintingly. Lots of thanks to him and to Mari Shullaw who has helped to complete the project.

Part I

A modern social form

1

Lifestyle and social structure

> LIFESTYLE EDITOR: *City Life* Manchester's fortnightly what's on magazine is looking for. . . . Applicants must have a sharp sense of style with catholic tastes in food, drink, music, books, entertainment, and a demonstrable interest in fashion.
>
> (Advertisement in *Guardian* 25/9/95)

> *Lifestyle* is currently one of the abused words of the English language. Social scientists, journalists, and laymen use it to refer to almost anything of interest, be it fashion, Zen Buddhism, or French cooking. . . . If the 1970s are an indication of things to come, the word *lifestyle* will soon include everything and mean nothing, all at the same time.
>
> (Sobel 1981, p. 1)

The prophecy quoted above may not have come literally true but it is certainly difficult to begin a book on lifestyles by telling the readers what

I think they are. The term is used a great deal but there are problems in defining something as nebulous as a lifestyle. I could tell you about my own or about others that I am familiar with, but building up instances tells us about social variety rather than what makes a lifestyle or not. In the first part of the book I shall therefore be mainly concerned with the contexts within which we have come to use a notion of lifestyles. In this first chapter I shall discuss lifestyles in the context of notions of social structure, and then in the next look at lifestyles as they have depended upon the development of consumer culture. In the third chapter I will be able to talk more precisely about the purposes to which concepts of lifestyles have been put.

I shall begin with the assumption that lifestyles are features of the modern world or what I shall also call modernity. What this means is that those who live in modern societies will use a notion of lifestyle to describe their own and others' actions. Lifestyles are patterns of action that differentiate people. In everyday interaction we can employ a notion of lifestyle without needing to explain what we mean; and indeed were we to be challenged we might find it difficult to go beyond a halting and very general description of the sorts of things lifestyle refers to. Lifestyles therefore help to make sense of (that is explain but not necessarily justify) what people do, and why they do it, and what doing it means to them and others.

This does not mean to say that lifestyles are relevant to everybody's lives, and we can easily imagine that there will be people (who might call themselves 'real people') who will deny that they have, or might want, a lifestyle. But in general lifestyle can be used in public discourse without needing to be glossed as being difficult or a bit of jargon. Lifestyles are therefore part of the everyday social life of the modern world and, if my initial presupposition is right, they function in interaction in ways that would be incomprehensible to those who do not live in modern society. I shall spend some time explaining why I place lifestyles as features of modernity. I do so because it is an essential prerequisite for later chapters on developments in theorising lifestyles, and because, more prosaically, it helps to give a more specific context for attempts to be explicit about how notions of lifestyle are used.

Distinctive patterns of social life are often summarised by the term culture (there are of course other more artistic meanings of culture but I do not want to take up that issue now). Indeed a culture has been defined as:

'the total life-style of a people – their customs, attitudes, and values, the shared understandings that bind them together as a society' (Kephart 1982, p. 93). I believe this is, however, to misuse the notion of lifestyle. While lifestyles are dependent on cultural forms, each is a style, a manner, a way of using certain goods, places and times that is characteristic of a group but is not the totality of their social experience. Lifestyles are sets of practices and attitudes that make sense in particular contexts. Although I have been careful to write of these styles as ways of using rather than producing things, by the end of the book I will want to overturn the distinction; but initially at least it helpfully clarifies the topic.

Modern social order requires complex machineries of elaborate differentiation and enforcement, as well as modern understandings of citizenship which presume a high degree of individual discipline. Both aspects suggest that it follows that order is *structured* and this can be understood in two ways. The first is that regulations and bureaucratic procedures are an impersonal network of bonds out there; they exist as a framework which operates in ways that are largely impervious to personal circumstance. The second aspect of structure is that a world of bureaucratic government is also a world of them and us. There are those who are able to take decisions influencing organisational goals and practices (or seem to be able to follow what is going on), and those who feel themselves subject to the exercise of others' power.[1] Notions of upper class or elite have been used to refer to those who have the ability to perpetuate their privileges through time and space, although there are inevitably a wide number of ways of measuring social stratification and defining sources of prestige in complex societies (see for example Crompton 1993).

Although class has tended to be emphasised by sociologists, largely because it has been seen to provide the logic of structural order as well as offering a theoretical possibility of transcendent resolution through conflict, other categories of structural identity have been emphasised in specific national circumstances. Most typically various modes of religious or ethnic identification have been used to sustain and explain structured privileges in modern social order. And universally, structures of gendered discrimination, known as patriarchal relationships, have cross-cut and reinforced other forms of oppression.[2] I am here though more concerned with the ways in which the language of forms and styles of status are negotiated. This is largely because there is by now a traditional distinction, following Weber (1966), between status as opposed to class, to indicate a

concern with social differences stemming from ways of using rather than producing resources (see Turner 1988). By the language of status I mean the ways in which the inhabitants of modern societies talk about and identify features of the life-worlds of structurally patterned social groupings, and how this discourse informs, shapes and motivates their understanding of the common sense of social order.

The language of social structure is reflexive in every form of society, but the characteristic becomes particularly significant in the social changes of modernity. This is because as the rigidities of established distinction become increasingly hard to sustain in eras of rapid social and physical mobility, new forms of distinction are continually being elaborated and therefore the manner of our concern with and respect for (or repugnance against) the various possible modes of others' civilisation becomes crucial in constituting the normative hierarchies of structured difference. My emphasis upon the language of social structure directs attention to the more general theme of the reflexive character of modernity's endemic concern with social identity, distinction and difference. Bayley has suggested that snobbery and taste are closely inter-related developments of modernity in that both are reactions to the collapse of 'naturally' ordered distinctions: 'Taste is a new religion whose rites are celebrated in department stores and museums, two institutions whose origins lie in exactly that historical period which witnessed the explosion of popular consumption' (1991, p. 209).

Reflexive means here that these social processes are in part constituted through the ways in which they are identified, enacted and responded to. Bayley quotes Furbank on snobbery who said that: ' "in classing someone socially, one is simultaneously classing oneself". He might just as easily have said "in criticizing someone else's taste, one is simultaneously criticizing oneself" ' (1991, p. 6). Bayley goes on to suggest that: 'Snobbery is. . . an institution at least as formidable as the prison system and certainly as characteristic as the age that created it. It can be. . . dated quite precisely to the years when the laws of consumer culture were being established' (1991, p. 70). A suggestion that prompts the further speculation that the by now well-worn metaphor of the panopticon should be supplemented by the dandy as iconic images of modernity.

I want to argue then that, even as the social classes of the modern world were being delineated and institutionalised (in each national context), the contours of distinction were being blurred and elaborated (for a review

of the literature on the extent to which social class differences still underlie differences in lifestyle attitudes, behaviours and taste see DiMaggio 1994). These cross-cutting groupings were identified – both by themselves and others – through features of cultural style and sensibility as much as by any more 'material' factors: 'The existence of artificial life-styles, self-consciously created as if they were works of art, suggests a lack of inevitability in the living patterns that classes adopt' (Bensman and Vidich 1995, p. 239).[3]

I shall illustrate what I mean here by describing two studies of aspects of the change from early modern to modern British society. The first is taken from Thomas's exploration of the ways in which humans saw themselves in relation to the 'natural world' of animals and plants that they inhabited (1983). In the three hundred years from 1500 to 1800 these relationships were in a process of transformation. They began with an overwhelming consensus that the natural world was a different order of creation that existed for human exploitation. To think of cruelty in how one used animals was absurd and anachronistic because man inhabited an intrinsically hostile world that had to be continually fought against, subjected and controlled. By the end of the period there were significant trends of change. It would be hard to estimate the extent to which new attitudes had spread throughout English society but amongst influential minorities a new complex of attitudes had largely been established. A complex that has become more powerful and pervasive in the course of the political institutionalisation of modernity.

Thomas summarises the character of these changes under four headings. The first is the shift from a rural to an urban population, begun in earnest in the eighteenth and established irreversibly in the nineteenth century. Partly because of the new density of urban conglomerations and partly because of associated social problems, the countryside became sentimentalised: 'a combination of literary fashion and social factors had created a genuine tension between the relentless progress of urbanisation and the rural longing to which an increasing number of people were subject' (1983, p. 253). The second and clearly related process of change was in attitudes towards distinctions between wilderness and cultivation. The latter is classically a display of civilisation, the order of human society imposed on incoherent nature.

In the later eighteenth century these assumptions were significantly modified by an aesthetic of the picturesque and more generally by the

values of romanticism so that the wilderness became seen as a means of access to elemental truths. This in turn leads on to the third characteristic change which was a shift in attitudes away from the pleasures of destructive exploitation of animals and a rejection of dysfunctional aspects of nature towards feelings of responsibility for conservation. In time a concern with preserving an idealised sense of nature would lead in our century to the creation of 'landscape gardens, green belts and animal sanctuaries' (1983, p. 287).

Fundamental to the changing attitudes towards the natural world then is an increasing self-consciousness about the ethics of those relations. It could not be, except for a doctrinaire minority, a simple shift from barbarism to enlightenment but was a more complex process of re-thinking the boundaries of human sociality. This is brought out clearly in the fourth and final characteristic of change which was the growth in those who found eating animals repugnant and, more generally, rejected forms of exploitation which used animals for human entertainment. In particular, the embarrassment about eating meat indicates how a new sensibility was being forged, one in which a cultural conception of identity, privileging ethical and aesthetic values, became an attractive indeed even 'natural' choice for some. The polemical force of this sensibility was not confined to a moment of social transition but has remained politically potent as: 'a growing conflict between the new sensibilities and the material foundations of human society', and thus as Thomas concludes: 'one of the contradictions upon which modern civilisation may be said to rest' (1983, p. 303).

The reason for citing this particular study of changing attitudes is in the idea that amongst particular groups a way of engaging with the cultural order of their environment became invested with significance. A way of engaging that I have referred to as a sensibility. By the term sensibility I mean, in part, a way of responding to events, or actions or phenomena that has a certain pattern or coherence, to the extent that identifying a sensibility provides a way of explaining or predicting responses to new situations. I also mean to indicate that these responses and choices are imbued by those concerned with ethical and aesthetic significance – ways of living that are fundamental to a sense of identity. Most typically, the contemporary exponents of this sensibility spoke of their attitudes as a concern with civilisation as contrasted with the barbarism of those whose attitudes to nature were more traditional.

Other examples of traditional attitudes that were beginning to be found repugnant come in the moves by reformers to stamp out blood sports (Malcolmson 1973), in particular those sports in which animals were pitched in combat with each other for human entertainment. The same sort of people who found these traditions repugnant also objected to what Spierenburg has called 'the spectacle of suffering' (1984; see also Foucault 1977). Here forms of punishment inscribed upon the body and particularly capital punishment were either abandoned as uncivilised in European countries or moved behind the protective walls of specialised institutions. This new sensibility of civilisation was associated with other social distinctions. In the hundred years between the middle of the eighteenth and the middle of the nineteenth centuries, there was an increasing emphasis on an idealised contrast between the coarse brutalities of the public sphere and the restrained gentility and gendered space of the private home (Davidoff and Hall 1987). In this ideology of domesticity we can begin to see more clearly the emergence of a sensibility that was delineating the contours of a lifestyle.

I said earlier that I would mention two studies of social change. The second is concerned with a period slightly later than the previous one and has a broader cultural remit than the English middle class (Weber 1975). William Weber's study of the emergent taste publics amongst the middle class of modernising societies will, however, further develop the expansion of notions of social structure that I am trying to present. In the era before the establishment of industries of mass entertainment musical concerts provided a European culture of sophisticated taste. Weber argues that the concert world is a relatively modern phenomenon, rapidly expanding in all cities in number and significance in the period between the end of the Napoleonic era and the revolutions of 1848. After that time the concert world was consolidated as one of the principal sources of entertainment for a distinctive social stratum in the structure of a cultural form that has persisted until the end of the twentieth century: 'The turbulent events between 1830 and 1848 brought, then, an independent artistic field such as had never been known in Western music history' (1975, p. 7).

Although distinctive public institutions of the musical concert were established in this era there were several types of concert and, more significantly for our purposes, at least three major musical styles. These were an operatic style emphasising excerpts and selections, which tended to be combined with a related instrumental style emphasising virtuoso