

Lifestyle Revolution: How taste changed class in late 20th-century Britain, Manchester University Press, 21 February 2023.

My recent book *Lifestyle Revolution: How taste changed class in late 20th-century Britain*, has had a long and fairly tortuous gestation. It began life about twenty years ago when its title was ‘Swinging London’, mainly because I had an idea for a book cover with that title written over an image of buildings being demolished by a huge wrecking ball caught in mid-swing. I even had a book contract for it with the now defunct publisher Berg (swallowed up by Bloomsbury some years ago). The book had a ready-made archive which was a complete bound set of *Sunday Times Colour Supplements* going back to the very first one in 1962, kept in the art library of the university where I worked. Going through those old issues and seeing the juxtapositions of black and white photographs of ‘rough sleepers’ or riots in France, alongside full-colour adverts for Bacardi and Ford, and the endless sections on recipes, holidays, and interior design, felt like a constellation of ingredients waiting to be detonated. I was also given a stack of old *Good Housekeeping* and *Homes and Gardens* magazines from the 1960s by a student from the cultural studies adult education evening class I taught at the time. I was mesmerised by adverts for fitted carpets and mobile central heating systems. When the time came for me to start working on the book, I went to the art library for what was going to be weeks spent on a systematic trawl through the colour supplements. They weren’t there! They had been thrown out and pulped some months before as the library needed to clear some space. I remorsefully cancelled my book contract and got on with other things, but that sense of a period – the 1960s and 70s – as weaving dream-images (and dream realities) over all sorts of structural changes continued to haunt me.

I picked up the project again in 2014, this time with more of a focus on furnishings, food, fashion, and housing set against a social world of massive increases in home ownership and, for a while at least, relatively high wages for workers! (I wrote about the importance of remembering the 1970s as a time of much greater equality in *The Conversation* – <https://theconversation.com/in-defence-of-the-1970s-the-decade-that-taste-forgot-196174>.)

The goal of the book is to try and talk about changes in taste as something more or at least different from a perpetuation of an already established system of class and status that students of Bourdieu tend to see repeated when it comes to taste. What if we saw taste as actively producing class experience rather than as a sort of a symbolic (and often random) epiphenomena to social divisions? This would mean taking all sorts of new items seriously at a sensuous and material level. I soon started building up what I thought of as a relay of

cultural ingredients that seemed to produce a 'mood board' for the times: yogurt, flat-pack furniture, quiche, duvets, stripped-pine kitchen tables, Mediterranean food, and on and on. Several things gradually hit me. While the postwar period is often seen in terms of a growing consumerism, that consumerism is often thought of in terms of introducing US-style consumption to the UK (supermarkets, ready-meals, and so on). Yet my set of relays were distinctly un-American. They were also often deliberately 'poor', celebrating peasant foods and chipped enamel mugs, as well as the social democratic modernism of Scandinavian interiors and what was perceived of as a less repressed sexuality. For a good while I had been noticing how so many pubs and cafés today, ones that had been springing up in the last twenty years, looked quite similar to what was being promoted in the 60s and 70s as a taste associated with the shop Habitat and the idea of a new domestic casualness: sanded floorboards, a rag-bag of miss-matched furniture (often with a few old church pews thrown in), a bare brick wall, and a host of quirky knick-knacks. My book acts, I hope, as a genealogy to this present.

I also started reading lots of sociology from the time, as well as what I thought of as the emerging sociological journalism that were filling newspapers and that you could find in magazines like *New Society*. The 1960s and 70s produced endless books about affluent workers and status anxiety and how the working classes were coping with wealth! (It was a time when popular sociology could produce best-sellers.) I was also reading lots of novels from the period, especially ones with sociologists as protagonists. J B Priestley's *The Image Men* from 1968, for instance, is an account of how two unemployed literature lecturers rebrand themselves as sociologists at a new university and set up a research centre looking at the 'cultural image' and status. It reads like a satire of what some people imagine people in cultural studies do all day long. I was reading the novels and the sociology in the same way: as historical evidence, but not so much of facts as of feelings and imaginings. I wasn't using the sociology to explain what was happening, but as a symptom of how change was being perceived, and to some extent experienced. We often hear people – sometimes condescendingly – claiming that people only like certain bits of culture because of the cultural capital it gives them, or the status it confers on them, and you can see how that opinion produces a consumerist self-consciousness in the 60s and 70s. 'Keeping up with the Joneses', is not a sociological truth in my book, but a belief kept alight by sociologists, novelists, and endless sitcoms.

I ended up writing a lot of the book twice – not something I'd necessarily recommend. I wrote it first in a fairly academic manner – filled with all my own intellectual anxieties

about scholarship. But I didn't want the book to be an expensive library type-book and to start with Manchester were going to publish it in hardback for about £90 – gulp. I persuaded them to publish it as a trade book. This meant I had to rewrite big chunks of it where I'd launched into an overly detailed critique of Bourdieu or discussed the finer points of Marxism! I also needed to give it a bit more pazazz. I'm glad I did, and I hope I pulled it off. I think it is a much better book as a result, and while it is still quite expensive (£25) it is in hardback and in full colour. My anxiety about scholarship still remains of course.