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**CULTURE vs. LUXURY :  
THE PARADOXES OF DEMOCRATIZATION\*\*\***

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## CULTURE VS. LUXURY: THE PARADOXES OF DEMOCRATIZATION

### Abstract

The starting point of this research is an apparently paradoxical observation:

– on one hand, cultural policies in several countries including France, aim to democratize the access to legitimate culture, with, at most, a modest success; for instance, a heavy public investment has not led to significant increases in the percentage of the population going to theatre or opera, nor has the structure of the audience evolved (education and income being the strongest determinants of frequentation);

– on the other hand, the rate of distribution of luxury products has strongly increased and these products are consumed, although with different frequencies, by a larger share of the whole population, leading several observers to speak of “democratization of luxury”.

The first part of the paper is theoretical. Based on a comparative analysis of contemporaneous paradigms of arts and luxury, we will identify some dimensions which are common to both sectors and attempt to demonstrate a certain amount of convergence into the experiential view grounded in individual subjectivity.

The second part of the paper is empirical and based on the analysis of French panel data. We will examine two main research questions:

– joint consumptions : are culture and luxury consumed by the same individuals?

– distinction indexes : which categories are more or less discriminating (i.e. their consumer structures are different, in terms of social class, from the general population) ?

Finally, we will raise some questions on the consequences of these observations for the definition of cultural policies.

### Key words

Cultural policies, luxury products, democratisation

## INTRODUCTION

The idea of this research came out of conversations between the two co-authors, one a specialist in arts management and the other in luxury brand management. While working together on another project (a marketing research textbook), we had the opportunity to exchange ideas on our respective areas of specialization. It then appeared that, in both areas, democratization was a central issue, but with two different perspectives:

- In the luxury sector, the extension of markets has led to a phenomenon of “luxury democratization”. The percentage of the total population buying, even occasionally, luxury products is continuously growing, reaching the symbolic figure of 50% in 1997. This market is no longer exclusive, with a client base of 63% in Europe in 2001 (Paternault, 2002). Luxury is now more accessible and democratic. This phenomenon can be labeled as “luxury for the masses” (Silverstein and Fiske, 2003) that differentiates so-called “new” luxury from “old” luxury brands and middle market or premium brands. This leads to the invention of a new category labelled as “masstige” i.e. high-quality products with prestige names at mass-market prices. Long used by fashion and cosmetics companies, it is now also a strategy for luxury car makers. This mass marketing of luxury (Nueno and Quelch, 1998) along with the expansion of retail distribution has diminished the gap between luxury and mass products/brands. This evolution may be considered by some players in the sector as a threat resulting from the risk of dilution or banalisation down-grading luxury into general consumption processes; as a result some luxury brands are struggling to maintain their status associated with exclusivity, rarity and distinction.
- On the other hand, the cultural policies in several countries including France, aim at democratization of the access to legitimate culture, with, at most, a modest success. For example, a heavy public investment has not led to significant increases of the percentage of the population going to the theatre or opera, nor has the structure of the audience evolved (education and income being the strongest determinants of frequentation). In the same time, the diffusion of the product of digital culture, based on the entertainment paradigm, is growing; a fading of the frontiers between high and low culture leading to “omnivore effects” (Holbrook and al., 2002; Lahire, 2004) is also observed. This evolution puts cultural policies based on the “democratization paradigm” into question.

We then decided to go further in our examination of these apparently paradoxical observations. In one case, democratization is an objective, but the results are rather negative. In the other case, it is the opposite (see Table 1). Firstly, we checked its factual basis by comparing the distribution rates of cultural and luxury products or services and the evolution of these rates (see Table 2). After this verification, the paper will be devoted to a theoretical and empirical analysis of the links between culture and luxury. The first section is theoretical, based on a comparative analysis of contemporaneous paradigms of arts and luxury and will attempt to demonstrate a certain amount of convergence of both sectors into the experiential view grounded in individual subjectivity (Pine and Gilmore, 1999; Evrard and Benavent, 2002). The second section will present empirical results based on a survey that included 19,640 interviews (in France in 2002) on the purchasing frequencies of 25 product or service categories pertaining either to the culture or luxury sectors. This empirical analysis deals on one hand with the joint consumption of these categories (are culture and luxury items consumed by the same individuals?), and on the other hand, on distinction indexes based on social classes that show the more or less discriminate structures of these categories. Finally, we will put the consequences of these observations for the definition of cultural policies into question.

**Table 1**  
**Culture vs Luxury**  
**A paradox of democratisation**

	<b>Goal</b>	<b>Result</b>
<b>CULTURE</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>
<b>LUXURY</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>Yes</b>

**Table 2**  
**Culture vs Luxury**  
**Some facts**

1/	<b>CULTURAL CONSUMPTION (French Ministry of Culture)</b>		
		<u>1989</u>	<u>1997</u>
	<b>Movies</b>	49	49
	<b>Performing arts</b>	21	23
	<b>Museums/Heritage</b>	39	42
2/	<b>LUXURY CONSUMPTION (Percentage of consumers/Europe)</b>		
		<u>1994</u>	<u>2000</u>
	<b>Total</b>	39	62
	<b>Regulars (&gt;= 4/year)</b>	14	19

## I- CULTURE VS. LUXURY: CONVEGENT OR DIVERGENT PARADIGMS?

### *Cultural democratization*

Government cultural policies, notably in Europe and more specifically in France, are mainly steered toward a democratization of culture. They aim to disseminate “major” cultural work to an audience which does not have ready access due to a lack of financial means or knowledge derived from education. From this perspective, a mark of success for a cultural policy would be an attendance structure for major artworks which matches that of the total population. This means that the disparities in cultural attendance would have been erased. However, there is a persistent gap in terms of education and income between the attendance structure of museums or theatres and that of the population as a whole. This conception stems from the vision of the democratization of culture as spreading “universal canons of beauty”. The question of the existence of universal norms, on which universalism is at odds with multiculturalism and relativism, has parallels in epistemology. So does the question of such norms, and whether or not they are considered as transcendental, since this contributes to defining the status of works of art, and notably their secular or religious character. For supporters of universalism, human

nature is characterized by the existence of universal norms, which in turn are used to justify the policies of cultural democratization that disseminate them.

From the point of view of aesthetics however, the same work may be perceived differently by various subjects, or at different moments in time. From such a plurality of readings is derived the analysis of aesthetic reception which focuses on the audience and tries to understand and analyze its reactions.

The paradigm of democratization is often linked to the vision of culture coming under the domain of education; this is illustrated by the success of Bourdieu's (1984) contribution on distinction, in line with his previous research on reproduction in the sociology of education.

The emphasis is therefore put on the cognitive aspects of the interactions with works of arts. A connoisseur, for example, is able to relate a piece of art to other contemporary or historic contributions, either in similar or different forms of artistic expressions.

This may lead to dogmatism inherent in the idea of a core culture associated with elitism and to the creation of "cultural ghettos" if the elite start to feel besieged.

The cultural democracy paradigm, on the other hand, considers the immanence of the artwork, seen "here and now", by a more active and participative consumer. The emphasis is put on affective aspects of the interactions with works of arts and the emotions that they arouse. This is a conception of sociology of leisure or entertainment. Therefore, the cultural democracy paradigm may drift to populism, which emphasizes short-term reactions linked to easy, immediate pleasure and obeys the "tyranny" of audience ratings. The oppositions between cultural democratization and democracy are summarized in Table 3.

**Table 3**  
**Cultural Policy: democratizing art vs. cultural democracy**

<b>Culture Policy</b>	<b>Democratization</b>	<b>Democracy</b>
<b>Definition of art</b>	Beauty Norms Artwork Emission	Aesthetics Taste Audience Reception
<b>Philosophical perspective</b>	Universalism Transcendence	Relativism Immanence
<b>Consumption perspective</b>	Cognitive Education	Affective Entertainment
<b>Limits</b>	Elitism Dogmatism	Populism

Adapted from Evrard, 1997.

### ***Luxury democratization***

Anthropologists and ethnologists have shown that luxury practices have always existed and are as old as mankind (Lipovetsky and Roux, 2003). If we focus on the 20<sup>th</sup> century only, the meaning of luxury and consumption has rapidly evolved (Berry, 1994). Starting with a "top-down" very elitist and aristocratic or trickle-down process of distinction from upper classes to imitation/identification by lower classes based on the conspicuous consumption paradigm (Veblen, 1899, Bourdieu, 1984). This diffusion process was inherited from the courtship systems which were prevalent in European history. Conformity of consumptions according to reference group norms was the process by which the desirability of a product or a brand was established. Ostentation was based on the easiness of identification i.e. visibility of the products and the brands. In the excesses of the 80's, luxury consumption was at its peak, logos were everywhere and luxury brands were manipulated as the absolute signifiers of the social identity. In the 90's, the opposite logic took place as a response to the previous

extremes. With dominant expectations saturated, people were searching more for self-expression, meaning and reassurance. They expected luxury brands to be worth the price and sacrifice, as long as they were in harmony with the person's well being, and corresponded to a "personal feast", to someone that deserves "the very best". So the rationale has moved from conspicuous-elitist logic to individualism-democratic logic because "every one is worth it!" In other words, the attitude toward luxury has evolved from a social code to a personal attitude. The growth figures of the luxury industry confirm that this democratization paradigm has been successful and meets people's expectations. New recruitment of customers is stimulated through a strong desire for luxury goods and what they represent symbolically (Lipovetsky and Roux, 2003). Youth and associated individualist values are the main drives in luxury market growth. Research suggests that a new breed of luxury goods customer is emerging, although the traditional brand-loyal 35-to-55-year-old, top 2% in terms of personal wealth, customer still exists (Euromonitor, 2001). This new clientele is younger, less brand loyal, more fashion-oriented and internet-friendly. However different consumer logics can be found which depends on the length of their experience with luxury brands (traditional luxury clientele vs. newcomers; core target vs. excursionists (Dubois and Duquesne, 1993)), with their domestic culture (Europe, the USA and Asia (Paternault, 2002) and their wealth (old money vs. new money). Looking back at the figures, if more than 70% of French women bought a luxury brand in 2002, only 6% of them are luxury customers across product categories: beauty-care, ready-to-wear, leather goods and accessories (Roux et al., 2003). In the 2000's, the emotional appeal of luxury has become more focused on the experiential aspects of consumption. Being a luxury brand in a brand concept store is a way to share an extraordinary and exceptional experience. The strength of the emotional appeal and the "synesthesia" within the "feelings" or five senses is therefore a condition for affective identification to the brand's values and imaginary or creative universe.

### ***Culture and Luxury: converging dimensions***

Despite their respective specificities, culture and luxury share some comparable dimensions (see table 4):

- both sectors cannot be reduced to the economic principle only, and offer symbolic or experiential benefits that are far beyond utilitarianism and functionalities;
- emphasis is put on creation; a parallel is made between the art work of the artist, and the artistic, exclusive and constantly renewed talent of the designer; both are recognized for their style and signature.

- The dichotomy between legitimate and popular tastes (Gans, 1974) or between high and low culture (Levine, 1988) parallels the tension, in the luxury sector, between “top-down” and “bottom-up” approaches;
- both sectors also share similar questions about the definitions of the frontiers between “art”, “craft” and “business” .

As an illustration of the blurring of frontiers, the modern art fair in Paris (FIAC) now hosts a section on design; Jean-Paul Gaultier, the haute-couture designer, plays, in an exhibition at Cartier’s Foundation for contemporary arts, with clothes made of bread showing the interplay between craft (bakery), design (couture) and art (hosted by a modern museum)... Following a comparable logic there has been an important exhibition on Giorgio Armani at the Guggenheim Museum (New-York and Bilbao). Luxury and haute-couture designers now enter museums. This acknowledges their contribution to the contemporary culture. But the reverse also exists: museums have their shops, from the Moma to the Louvre, where visitors can buy products, reprints, reproduction of “cult objects” or “art work” transformed into “products”. On the other side, luxury brands also transform their flag ships stores into museums, theaters or “luxury cathedrals”.

The relationship between creation and business is more accepted in the luxury sector, as compared to the culture sector. Designers are expected to bring an emotional added value to the product, in order to bring a commercial added value, *“My lemon squeezer is not meant to squeeze lemons, but to start a conversation”*<sup>1</sup> says the star designer Philippe Starck. He underlines the importance of the aesthetics of the product as a link between people, sharing a common emotion, connivance and sense of belonging.

One may then hypothesize that the luxury and cultural democratization paradigms will therefore converge in the democracy of customer experience.

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<sup>1</sup> This quotation is borrowed from a conversation with Françoise Jollant former director of two design school in France and pedagogical director of the International MBA in Luxury Brand Management at the Essec .

**Table 4**  
**Culture vs. luxury**  
**Convergent dimensions**

• <b>Beyond utilitarianism / functionality</b>
• <b>Conspicuous consumption /Distinction</b>
• <b>Problem of definition of frontiers</b>
• <b>Creation : Artist/Author/Designer/ Entrepreneur</b>
• <b>Innovation/Patrimony</b>
• <b>Legitimate/Popular (Top-down vs. Bottom-up)</b>

## II-EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS

As previously mentioned, the empirical analysis, based on large-scale survey data, will attempt to answer two main research questions:

- joint consumption: are culture and luxury consumed by the same individuals?
- distinction indexes: which consumption categories are more or less discriminating (i.e. are their consumer structures more or less different, in terms of social classes from the general population?)

### *Data*

This analysis will be based on data from a large scale survey. 19,640 people answered a self-administered questionnaire on their purchasing and consumption habits. The survey was conducted in France in 2002 by Taylor-Nelson-Secodip. For this study, we extracted the results on 12 categories in the luxury sector and 13 categories in the cultural sector from a larger data bank.

### ***Joint Consumption***

For this analysis, we calculated the indexes of associations (Yule Q) between binary variables defined as, for each product or service category, the possession of cultural products, the use of cultural services, or the purchase of luxury products during the twelve months prior to the survey. These indexes were calculated for each combination of two products or services (i.e. 300 indexes).

The results revealed the existence of three main groups with strong links (meaning that if an interviewee is a consumer of one item in the group, his/her probability of consuming another item of the same group is high):

- *cultural possessions* (books, CDs, DVDs) corresponding to home entertainment;
- *going out* corresponding to an orientation towards leisure outside the home. In this group, two subgroups can be identified: cultural going-out corresponding to “high” forms of art (museums and exhibitions; performing arts) and “popular” going-out or “low” forms of entertainment (night clubs). A few items occupy an intermediary position between these two subgroups (rock and jazz concerts; sports events);
- *luxury products*: in this group, the strongest links are between clothing items (which may result from a gender effect which will be examined in further research).

The associations between items belonging to the different groups are weaker (but not necessarily null). The weakest indexes were observed between items belonging to the “going out” groups and items belonging to the other categories (cultural or luxury products). This suggests an explanation based on orientation towards material possessions vs. experiential consumption. Further research will explore this hypothesis as well as the possible effects of age and gender.

### ***Distinction indexes***

The second phase of analysis dealt with the calculation of distinction indexes. The aim of this index is to compare, on a specific nominal variable (for example, demographics), the consumption structure of a product or service (i.e. the distribution of the consumers among the categories of the variable under study) with the structure of the general population. The calculation of the “distinction index” (developed by Bascoul, 2003) is based on the chi-square distance between the two distributions. The higher the index, the greater the distance of consumption structure from the general population, i.e. the more “distinctive”, according to Bourdieu’s meaning, the consumption of a product or service.

This application takes social class into consideration (defined in 4 categories). Further research will analyze other variables (gender, education, age, ...). The results presented in Table 5 have been calculated for selected items from the list of cultural and luxury products and services, plus another variable which is the type (genre) of book bought during the previous twelve months. It should be noted that the index measures the absolute difference between the two distributions. Additional information is the direction of this difference: in most cases, this direction is positive (the upper classes consuming more than the lower classes), with one exception (indicated in the table by an asterisk): the case of going to night clubs (“night clubbing”) for which the value of the index is low (which means democratization), but with more consumers from the lower classes.

**Table 5**  
**Culture vs. luxury**  
**Distinction indexes**

<b>Dictionary</b>	<b>0.42</b>
<b>Sports Events</b>	<b>0.43</b>
<b>Night Clubs*</b>	<b>0.48</b>
<b>DVD Possession</b>	<b>0.58</b>
<b>Sportswear</b>	<b>0.58</b>
<b>Concert (Variety, Rock, Jazz)</b>	<b>0.94</b>
<b>Perfumes</b>	<b>0.96</b>
<b>Skin Care</b>	<b>1.05</b>
<b>Museums/Exhibitions</b>	<b>1.21</b>
<b>Books (Purchase)</b>	<b>1.41</b>
<b>Performing Arts</b>	<b>1.46</b>
<b>Wines and Spirits</b>	<b>1.66</b>
<b>Fashion</b>	<b>2.08</b>
<b>Books (Tourist guides)</b>	<b>2.28</b>
<b>Leather Goods</b>	<b>2.38</b>
<b>Books (Essays)</b>	<b>2.73</b>
<b>Interior Design</b>	<b>3.64</b>

Table 5 presents the index values for the 17 selected items. Beyond the rather anecdotic case of each product or service, two principal observations should be made:

- there is no separation of culture or luxury on the index values. The values of distinction indexes for items from each field are mixed, which means that cultural items are not systematically more democratized than luxury items, and vice versa;
- a closer analysis of the two fields leads to the observation that two different logics appear to determine the ranking of the index values: for cultural items, the order of values reflects the traditional model of cultural hierarchy (high/low); for luxury items, the order is more a reflection of price levels.

## CONCLUSION

After the initial observation of an apparent paradox (democratization being an issue for both culture and luxury, but in opposite ways) we analyzed the theoretical foundations of the evolution of these two sectors. A major conclusion of this section was the identification of a sort of convergence toward an experiential consumption paradigm: in both areas, increasing importance is given to taking into account the individual (citizen/consumer) and understanding his/her interaction (experience) with artistic and luxury products or services. In the cultural sector, this evolution may lead to conflicts between educational norms and consumer tastes. In the luxury sector, extended distribution could create a risk resulting from the loss of symbolic value.

The empirical phase demonstrated on one hand, that consumption overlaps are relatively weak, but on the other hand that cultural consumption is not more (or less) democratized than luxury consumption, which confirms the initial paradoxical observations.

In terms of cultural policy in the context of a crisis, or at least a re-examination of the traditional democratization paradigm, one orientation could be to devote more effort to the understanding of the way individuals interact with artistic and cultural products and services, i.e. their consumption experience. The context of this experience may strongly influence their motivations to have access to the arts; examples of contextual importance are the contrast between the success of events like the “*fête de la musique*” or “*nuit blanche*”<sup>2</sup> and the stagnation of traditional modes of diffusion.

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<sup>2</sup> *Fête de la musique* is "music day" where everyone goes outside to play or listen to music in the streets and *nuit blanche* ("all-nighter") involves staying awake all night and attending various events such as concerts or arts exhibitions and performances.

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