

Innovations in Material Culture

Their Role in Past and Present

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To study innovations in material culture means to look at a lot of differences in historical and present times. Starting with an example of the late 17th century we will look at the changing kinds of treasuring up of silver stocks. Besides this the reasons for innovations are discussed – why do people cease to use one object and start to use another. Is it due to changing attitudes or to create advantage and what can be said about the importance of norms and values? Concerning the differences in historical times and nowadays we will focus on the sources and methods, especially concerning social conditions and present lifestyle. Recent German studies such as Gerhard Schulze's and the Outfit-Studies are presented and discussed briefly. Finally some reasons for the differences such as the rapidity of change, the question of supply and demand, the social rank orders and others are taken into account and underlined.

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When in 1663 the rich widow of a high civil servant died in Brunswick, there was taken a probate inventory as usual. Due to this written source we can take a very detailed look at this well-off household. The widow Busch was a member of one of the old Brunswick "Geschlechter", the first rank of the old urban orders, which have not had their former economic and political power since the end of the sixteenth century, but which have remained distinguished and exclusive families. Their lifestyle has become pretty old-fashioned and so had that of Dorothee Busch! Her maid servant slept together with her in the same room – this was totally unusual in wealthy urban families at this time – her rooms were overfilled with old outmoded furniture, her chests and cupboards were stuffed with linen adorned with coats of arms and with hundreds of superfluous things. But there was one little object in her daily living room that made us sit up and take notice. This was a small silver candlestick with two angels' heads, as it was listed (Mohrmann 1990a: 197ff.). But why –

may we ask – is this small silver candlestick so interesting, and what makes it so important for my subject?

To light rooms by candlesticks was naturally very common. But in the several hundreds of Brunswickian households in the 16th and 17th centuries which I have investigated, amongst over 2000 candlesticks which are enumerated there, only this one in the living-room of an old-fashioned old lady is made of silver. Conversely, amongst the hundreds and hundreds of silver objects in Brunswick households during these two centuries there is only this unique candlestick (Mohrmann 1987: 114).

In early modern times it was rather usual to treasure up wealth in silver goods. The most numerous objects in these often very large silver stocks were cups and goblets and other precious drinking-vessels. It was no less a figure than Martin Luther himself who exhorted his wife Katharina during a severe sickness to look after their silver cups with care: "You know that we have nothing besides them" (Mohrmann 1990a: 201).

From about the beginning of the 18th century the treasuring up of silver stocks totally changed. Different kinds of drinking-vessels were now no longer stored – they almost totally disappeared and were probably recast –, but the various parts of silverplate, coffee-sets and tea-services or representative objects as trays, chandeliers etc. now became the treasured stock of silver goods. Of course candlesticks made of silver were not an innovation of the late 17th century. For centuries they were to be found in churches and monasteries and bore witness to the marvellous work and production of European gold- and silversmiths. But candlesticks in urban and rural households were usually made of brass, pewter or sheet iron. One has to look very carefully to discover the first silver candlesticks in untitled households as a sign of changing attitudes and values. As to the widow Busch, one has to add that she lived since her marriage in Celle at the court of the Dukes of Hanover which could perhaps solve this little enigma (see Mohrmann 1990a: 197ff.).

Let me here leave this small historical example and move to the more general aspects of my subject. For the study of innovations in material culture, there are many differences in historical and in present times. There are first of all the objects themselves that you can investigate. But the deeper in time you go, the rarer they become. Seldom do they bear the date of their production and so they must be dated indirectly by scientific, art-historical or other methods. Coming to modern times these difficulties are not as grave. We know the years of the invention and of the adoption as innovations of many items and we can exactly follow their lines of diffusion in time, in space and social groups.

But is that the subject I – as an ethnologist – am really interested in? I would like to say no because I am not primarily interested in the objects themselves and all that concerns them, but rather in getting to know the people who were occupied with them and their circumstances and context. Why do they cease to use one object and start to use another? Are there changing attitudes or greater advantage, do they consider the pros and cons and do they

really benefit from innovations? Which are the norms and values that stand behind the innovations and what about the barriers that hinder the innovations in one social group and promote them in another? You all know about the very differentiated instruments to investigate innovations. We are informed of the importance of looking for the complexity and invisibility of innovations, we are aware of investigating the compatibility and the relative advantage of a new idea perceived and adopted by members of a social system. Not least we have knowledge of the importance of norms and values being accepted by a social group or milieu for the process of cultural change (Rogers/Shoemaker 1971; Havelock 1973; Kiefer 1967; Bringéus 1968).

I do not want to give you a detailed survey of the researches on innovations. Since my topic concerns the role of innovations past and present, I prefer to underline the differences in historical times and nowadays.

Looking firstly at the sources and methods, the differences are evident. Research on the historical processes of innovations is mostly based on written records such as probate inventories or bills and accounts, diaries, private correspondence etc. The objects are taken into account if possible. Concerning the methods, many historical investigations are quantitative analyses often combined with qualitative studies, or in other words combinations of hard and soft methods (Mohrmann 1990b).

For the present time the instruments of research are much more numerous. Mostly the rich and elaborated empirical methods of the social sciences are applied. This leads to more difficulties with the abundance of information than with its lack or scarcity – a problem you have almost all the time in historical investigations.

Due to these differences one of the most important problems is the possibility of analysing the kind of the people behind the innovations. Nowadays you can shape your questionnaires in a detailed manner, you can visit your informants in their living-rooms and take pictures of them to study directly their ways of living; almost all the social data you want to investigate can be collected and almost nothing

ing will be left out. But what about these possibilities in the past?

You are fortunate if you have more than the name, the place and the time of the concerned people. If you know the profession and the income, the properties, the marital status and other important data you are really fortunate. But what can these data tell you about the changing attitudes and mental patterns, about the values and norms of your investigated members of a social system? Very often you cannot fill the gap and must be satisfied with hypotheses.

Due to these difficulties, historical investigations of processes of innovation remained rather cautious in their interpretation of social conditions. Often only lower, middle and upper classes are distinguished, or the ranks and orders provided by luxury edicts of early modern times were the basis for further evaluation. Sometimes at least occupation can be a help for interpretation. Looking at these humble possibilities for social analysis in historical times, one can really become envious in examining present empirical methods.

Let us therefore have a look at present lifestyle and everyday-life research which has been used or can be used as a basis for the study of innovations. I will focus mostly on two recent German studies, knowing well that firstly Pierre Bourdieu's "Fine distinctions" has to be named. But nowadays his theses are well-known enough so that all more recent studies are mostly deeply indebted to him. One example is Gerhard Schulze, the author of a cultural-sociological bestseller of 1992. He describes and analyses German society as an "Erlebnisgesellschaft", as a society orientated by experiences and adventures. He makes a distinction between five different milieus, all in search of experiences and the pleasures of life, the one only by consumption, the others by means of self-realization, the one by looking for entertainment, the others by concentrating on harmony and sociability (in German: Niveau-, Harmonie-, Integrations-, Selbstverwirklichungs-, Unterhaltungsmilieu). Decisive for all milieus is the winning of distinction by different kinds of enjoyment, and from here it is not a big step to see the importance of in-

novations in material culture. Pierre Bourdieu has already described and analysed his data to show that each social group is not primarily defined by what is owned by it, but by what it is contrasted. To keep one's distance from others – consciously or unconsciously – gives more fellow feeling to a group or a milieu than all other common attributes. And according to him, the most decisive point for the community and the common ground of a social group is its taste. Taste really produces the lifestyle; it is the ability to adopt objects or ways of acting in a material or symbolic way. The taste which is common to a group is directed by a system of mental attitudes and of unconscious patterns of thinking, perceiving and acting, comprising the so-called "habitus" (Bourdieu 1979). Neither Bourdieu nor Gerhard Schulze give too many examples to illustrate the material side of the different lifestyles, but both agree on the importance of differentiation and distinction. "The aversion to other different lifestyles is presumably one of the most powerful barriers between classes" (Bourdieu 1979: 60).

Much more orientated towards the objects of everyday life, particularly clothing, but the different social milieus too, are the so-called Outfit-Studies by the "Spiegel" realized by the Sinus-Institut. They have identified and classified eight social milieus, each characterised by its own set of opinions and ways of living. These milieus are the following:

- upper-conservative milieu (8%)
 - petty-bourgeois milieu (24%)
 - traditional blue-collar milieu (7%)
 - uprooted blue-collar milieu (12%)
 - social-climber milieu (25%)
 - technocratic-liberal milieu (9%)
 - hedonistic milieu (12%)
 - alternative lifestyle milieu (3%)
- (Outfit 2: 1989: 23)

The brief descriptions of the social milieus make a distinction between the goals in life, the lifestyle, the attitudes towards work and achievement, the preferences in leisure, family and partnership.

One of the main tasks of the studies was to identify and to describe target groups

1. "by providing on the one hand a complete description of the respondent, one that takes into account all aspects of his everyday life (personal values, lifestyles, attitudes to work and leisure etc.) – the so-called milieu perspective
2. and on the other hand, portraying different types of consumers defined in terms of their attitudes to clothing and fashion goods (market perspective)" (1989: 25).

The crucial point of the Outfit emphasis was layed on questions such as the importance of clothing and of a well-groomed appearance for men and women, the attitude to clothing, to fashion, to accessories and to buying clothing and – the most extensive questions – the brand loyalties. Besides this it was asked for consumption priorities, for preferred places of purchase and the preferred style of dressing and for attitudes to exclusive clothing and to luxury goods. Of course each respondent was also classified by the milieu to which he or she belonged.

Concerning the results I can only enumerate but not interpret the different types.

The target groups for women's fashion:

1. the disinterested anti-fashion type (10%)
 2. the ambitious follower of fashion (17%)
 3. the trendy youngster (14%)
 4. the knowledgeable sophisticate (21%)
 5. the cultivated tradition-conscious type (8%)
 6. the unobtrusive conformist (17%)
 7. the self-assured nonconformist (13%)
- (1989: 27).

The target groups for men's fashion:

1. the conventional unpretentious type (27%)
 2. the disinterested anti-fashion type (11%)
 3. the self-assured individualist (11%)
 4. the unambitious conformist (19%)
 5. the trendy follower of fashion (15%)
 6. the discriminating establishment type (17%)
- (1989: 43).

Looking at these extraordinarily sharply discriminated types and comparing them with their supposed counterparts in historical times

you can really become envious as a historian. Such fine distinctions could never be made in the past. Which type, for instance might Dorothee Busch have been? An ambitious follower of fashion when she went, just married, to Celle and a cultivated tradition-conscious type when living as an old widow in Brunswick? We do not know.

It can only be mentioned here that another research project based on the same differentiation of social milieus as specified above has investigated the way of living in Germany today. Nine different groups or styles are distinguished as follows:

- rustic style (38.9%)
 - upper conservative tradition (20.3%)
 - classic modern style (17.6%)
 - nostalgic style (15.9%)
 - informal cosiness (15.4%)
 - representative individuality (13.4%)
 - conventional comfort style (11.6%)
 - anti-conventional style (4.0%)
 - avant-garde (2.7%)
- (Wohnwelten 1989: 58ff.).

But another outcome has to be underlined here. It is the incredible rapidity of change. Nowadays you have scarcely noticed an innovation when it is already "out", outmoded or has disappeared. In historical times it seems to be not only decades but sometimes centuries before an innovation is not only perceived but accepted. A well investigated example from a totally different field is for instance coffee-drinking (Teuteberg/Wiegelmann 1986: 185ff.; Schivelbusch 1983: 25ff.).

But what are the reasons for these very long times of diffusion in the past, and the extremely short times in the present? I can only make some remarks and make some guesses about this really important question.

I think it is too easy to focus only on the question of supply and demand and on the overwhelming impact of advertising and sales promotion in our time. Of course we have not had publicity campaigns by the media in the past and to read that a German teenager has seen 200.000 commercials before he is 20 years old (Spiegel 1992, 52: 118), means we should

pity him and not feel joy. Of course the possibilities of consumption have increased enormously and lower social groups nowadays have financial opportunities that the middle classes in the past never had. But renouncing consumption is an attitude in the past and in the present as well.

Taking into account the strict rank order in the past may explain a little bit but not all. A lot of information about the different orders derives from the numerous luxury and dress-edicts of early modern times. But nowadays we are informed of the relative inefficacy of all these edicts. Of course the old order with its caste-feeling was a sharper instrument for dividing societies into different groups with different signs and symbols of being a part of these groups than the social milieus of today. But the "innovativeness" in historical times has sometimes been relatively high – not all the time, there are short periods with higher and long periods with lower readiness to adopt innovations –, and willingness to renounce consumption in other parts of daily life has also existed. But here we have an obvious difference to our time. Nowadays, as the Outfit-Studies have shown, many people are ready to buy very cheap objects in one field in order to have money to buy luxury goods in an other. Middle and upper classes in the past have very seldom acted in this manner. They tried to find the next best, but very rarely went down to the cheapest in order to own the best in another field. Another variant has been the behaviour of labourers at the end of the last century: In order to possess a luxury good, which was at that time for instance a sofa, they even renounced basic goods.

But to compare the role of innovations in material culture in past and present is a rather hard task. The sources and the objects, the methods and the hitherto existing results are too different to draw parallels. But for those engaged in historical investigations, it is

sometimes very fruitful to have a look at the present time – and vice versa.

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