Figurational Dynamics and Parliamentary Discourses of Living Standards in Ireland

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Abstract

While the concept of living standards remains central to political debate, it has become marginal in sociological research compared to the burgeoning attention given to the topic of consumer culture in recent decades. However, they both concern how one does and should consume, and, indeed, behave at particular times. I use the theories of Norbert Elias to explain the unplanned but structured (ordered) changes in expected standards of living over time. This figurational approach is compared to other alternative explanations, particularly those advanced by Bourdieu, Veblen and Baudrillard. Though these offer some parallels with Elias's theories, I argue that consumption standards are produced and transformed through the changing dependencies and power relations between social classes. They cannot be reduced to the intentions, interests or ambitions of particular elites, nor to the needs of social systems. Using qualitative data from parliamentary debates in Ireland to trace changing norms and ideals of consumption, as well as historical data to reconstruct shifts in social interdependencies, I further contend that discourses of living standards and luxury are vital aspects of the growing identification and empathy between classes, which in turn encourages greater global integration in the face of emigration and national decline.

Keywords: Figurations; standard of living; consumer culture; luxury; Elias; Ireland

Introduction

The standard of living has become a commonplace of political and economic discourses throughout the world, yet this standard is rarely seen as a social standard in process and intertwined with other social processes. Following Norbert Elias, I argue that changes in social interdependencies over time shape the conceptual understanding of living standards, and that these moving standards in turn reconfigure such interdependencies. Changing discourses around standard of living and its relation to discourses of luxury do not merely reflect broader figurational developments (in the Eliasian sense), but also advance civilizing processes through rising expectations of consumption parity with other nation-states, which in turn informs political choices towards greater social integration on a global level. These choices are made (and re-made at recurrent intervals) within the context of a largely unplanned structural dynamic.

Elias (2000: 482) defines figuration as 'a structure of mutually orientated and dependent people . . . the network of interdependencies formed by individuals'. It is a fluid, dynamic social network which changes in unplanned ways (though specific individuals make plans within the context of the developing figuration). Discourses concerning consumption can also be considered as part of a symbolic formation that reflect and shape the social figuration. A symbolic formation is a 'network of interwoven sound-patterns' (Elias 1991: 63) in that the meaning of specific words depends on their structural relation with others, but only in the sense that these symbols serve as a means of orientation and communication for and between people.

They are not abstract formations but necessary components of the broader social figuration. While aspects of consumption have been examined through a figurational lens (most notably the analysis of table manners by Elias (2000) himself), these studies tend to be restricted to particular consumption practices, such as food and appetite (Mennell 1996) and smoking (Hughes 2003). Here, I address the broader development of a culture of consumption (or consumerism), using the fluid rhetorical relation between living standards and luxury in Ireland as an empirical example.

By examining parliamentary discourses around the standard of living it is possible to get access to the prevailing norms regarding acceptable access to commodities and other consumption experiences. These norms reflect and shape what is considered necessary to consume in order to live in a particular society at a particular time. As cultures of consumption are prone to contestation and difference, parliamentary statements reveal the power relations between various social groups through which the objects and values of consumption develop. There are of course many sites of politics regarding consumption (from the household to the United Nations), but parliaments are particularly significant because of their national scope and legislative mandate. Parliaments are social institutions charged with resolving conflicts and distributing resources (Burns and Kamali 2003).

This paper asks how standards of living have advanced in the context of developing social interdependencies at varying levels of integration, from local to global. How have developing class relations shaped the meaning, morality and politics of luxury? The study relies on the analysis of parliamentary debates in Ireland between 1920 and 1980. The figurational dynamics have been reconstructed through an analysis and synthesis of historical events and social structures derived from historiographical texts and official statistics. The result is an account of living standards as processes explicable in the context of other intertwined social processes.

The sociology of living standards

Though 'standard of living' has become less significant in sociology since the mid-twentieth century, interest has grown in the sociology of consumption in recent decades. Of particular significance has been Bourdieu's (1984) *Distinction*, which seeks to connect social class relations, consumption practices and individual habitus. There are certainly parallels with Elias, who also eschewed the dualism of structure and agency and emphasized the social relational genesis of the meaning and function of objects. But Elias is more committed to the changing nature of people and things, as well as the deeper continuity between successive periods or generations underlying social transformation. This continuity is in the form of the unplanned social order between social formations over time; there is a structure to social change which means that despite historical ruptures, empirical analysis and synthesis reveals that new formations emerge through the immanent dynamics of earlier ones. Bourdieu contrasts Elias

as 'more sensitive than I am to continuity' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 93). Yet his work stresses social reproduction over transformation (Calhoun 1995; Jean-Hughes Décheaux cited in Reed-Danahay 2005: 64).

Though Bourdieu (1984: 73, 227, 492) follows Elias to some extent in terms of the social distance between classes and the related status competition (distinction) through consumption practices, he tends to treat social processes as recurring features of class relations rather than long-term changes encompassing shifting and multiplying social interdependencies and power ratios. In *Distinction*, Bourdieu does not ignore history, but for him it serves more as a background and empirical resource rather than the very material from which his theoretical model is constructed. For example, while changes in occupational status and structure over time in France are acknowledged (Bourdieu 1984: 125–65), the focus remains on individual and collective strategies deployed by relevant actors to maintain status rather than the broader social processes of functional specialization, social differentiation, and growing interdependencies which prefigure such strategies and reconstitute the symbolic and emotional valences of objects and the conduct of people. The 'intensified division of labour' is seen as the result of agents trying to 'produce new occupations' (Bourdieu 1984: 150), which neglects the dynamic, multi-tiered, inter-organizational pressures that persuade central functionaries to construct specialized functions and positions. Of course people who perform these new social functions may try to enhance their status, but this is a more instrumental account of social change compared to Elias. Overall Bourdieu treats consumption as a site of recurring class struggles and strategies, while for Elias, consumption is explored as a site of continual change (both in the conduct and objects of consumption) that reveal changing class power ratios resulting from unplanned state formation and pacification processes. Elias examines the unintentional mechanisms, or the structure, of social change.

Specifically in relation to living standards and luxury, Bourdieu superimposes too rigid an opposition between 'taste of necessity' and 'taste of luxury' in terms of dominated–dominant class relations. While the working class and those low on economic capital (like teachers) oppose luxury, this is based on making a virtue out of necessity. Bourdieu (1984: 310) does recognize a 'new logic of the economy', driven by the marketing functions of the new bourgeoisie, which 'judges people by their capacity for consumption, their "standard of living", their life-style, as much as for their capacity of production'. But the dynamic of this change is the narrow competition between the new and old bourgeoisie and the former's attempt at status enhancement. New bourgeois positions are simply attributed to 'recent changes in the economy' around 'the symbolic work of producing needs' (Bourdieu 1984: 345), an analysis tending towards circularity; the need to produce needs produces inventors of needs.

Veblen (1970) too examines class relations surrounding consumption, but he assumes a much more emulative dynamic towards the highest class compared to Bourdieu. Veblen (1970: 63–5) sees the patriarchal restriction on the consumption of luxuries by the 'non-leisure class' easing with the transition to a 'peaceable stage', a social structure akin to the industrialization phase in America at the turn of the twentieth century. Again there are some parallels with Elias;

the meanings of objects change over time, and class distances narrow while within-class differentiation elaborates through consumption displays. For Veblen, the living standards of the leisure class serve as the model for lower classes (unless strict class barriers prohibit emulation), which is not unlike Elias's conclusion that the courtly model of civilized conduct gradually diffused from noble circles throughout the class structure. But Elias recognized more clearly the contingency of this social process, depending on the history of state formation and centralization processes, as well as the inter-related history of conflict between classes. Veblen offers little explanation for the transition from one stage of society to another. He also depends on psychological (and biological) factors such as 'the instinct of workmanship' and 'habit' for maintaining and advancing standards of living; whenever wealth allows, 'the ancient propensities of the race' will shape the direction of living standards, and the 'need for conspicuous waste' is always ready to consume industrial output (Veblen 1970: 85).

Similar to Bourdieu, Baudrillard (1981, 1998) regards objects of consumption as signs within a hierarchical system of differentiation. Though he places far less emphasis on social distinction than Bourdieu or Veblen, Baudrillard (1981: 33–4) also highlights the 'social obligation' of conspicuous consumption; increasing living standards means mere possession of objects is no longer sufficient and consumers must display distinctive usage of objects. While Baudrillard (1981) connects the multiplication of possessions with individual class mobility (which he sees as highly limited), he neglects the historically shifting power relations between entire classes. The apparent wider accessibility of goods is seen as obscuring the lack of political participation; the 'slave morality' of consumption postpones the 'master morality' of power (Baudrillard 1981: 61–2). However, politics is often about consumption; the two processes are intertwined (for example, see Daunton and Hilton 2001), a point accepted elsewhere by Baudrillard (1998: 84), but from the perspective of political control of consumption for the sake of the system rather than a dynamic network of mutually dependent people debating the functions and meanings of consumption. In his essay on needs, he (1981: 63–87) argues that this concept of need must be invented to bridge the imagined divide between subject and object, echoing Elias's critique of this false opposition. Like Elias, he rejects the notion of language as an 'absolute autonomous *system*' (Baudrillard 1981: 75, original emphasis), but he posits the logic and language of exchange as prior to the individual, a position at odds with Elias's insistence on intertwined and inseparable social, symbolic and psychic processes. For Baudrillard (1981: 80–2), there can be no natural minimum survival level (a minimum standard of living) as this is determined 'in all societies' in relation to luxury. There is little understanding here of the historically developing and society-specific processes producing the social standards of consumption. Baudrillard is forced to rely upon the internal logic of the capitalist system producing the need to consume in each individual.

As well as these sociological studies of consumption, many historians have examined the politics and meaning of living standards over time. These empirically rich studies, however, have not really explained the development of these standards in the light of shifting class relations. Though De Grazia (2005) characterizes Europe's living standards as highly class stratified in the

early twentieth century, she argues that America's high standard of living more or less directly declassified European standards without explaining the immanent class dynamics in Europe. Yet the political and intellectual concern for 'a decent standard of living' during this period (and beyond) is clear: 'No issue in the modern world has generated greater dispute or more disparate remedies than the minimum that humans require to live in dignity' (De Grazia 2005: 76). According to De Grazia (2005: 342), the rapid advance in living standards in Europe during the 1950s can be attributed to the cultural conflict between Europe's idea of the social citizen with consumption rights and America's sovereign consumer. This cultural clash produced a new hybrid, citizen-consumers, but the social mechanisms of change are difficult to discern beyond the conceptual synthesis emerging through European exposure to American consumer culture. Similarly, Donohue (2006) examines the intellectual history of consumerism in the USA. Within classical liberal theory of the nineteenth century, consumption was ideally kept to moderate limits. Similar to the Irish case discussed below, consumption of luxuries became increasingly acceptable through the twentieth century. But Donohoe does not see this cultural change as part of broader social structural changes. Indeed, the intellectuals are subjectified as the social innovators; for example, Simon Patten's 'theories prepared the ground for a consumer-oriented political economy' (Donohue 2006: 45). Other historians (Cohen 2004; Moskowitz 2004) also tend to attribute changes in living standards to the intentions and actions of policymakers, big business and organized labour, though Cohen argues there were some unintended consequences such as the rising status of African Americans and women through their purchasing power. Moskowitz acknowledges the co-production of living standards through the interactions of manufacturers and consumers, but she primarily focuses on the planned aspects of the process; all the relevant groups (manufacturers, marketers, educators and consumers) 'succeeded in this task' of transforming silverplate flatware from a luxury good into an everyday household object during the early twentieth century (Moskowitz 2004: 23).

The concept of luxury is often opposed to the idea of minimum, decent or comfortable living standards, but social explanations are rarely offered for the movement in the meaning and morality of luxury (see Berry 1999; Hilton 2004; Horowitz 1992; Shovlin 2000). Nevertheless, the finding by both Berry and Hilton that luxury has undergone a process of moral neutralization since the eighteenth century finds support here. Falk (1994: 99), following Sekora, also sees a neutralization of luxury over the course of the eighteenth century, and connects this to the 'public benefits' of consumption in terms of wealth and progress identified by Adam Smith and other political economists. Similarly, Cohen (2004) and Glickman (1997) identify an expansion and diffusion of living standards in twentieth-century America, demonstrating the absorption of luxury into consumption norms over time. In the Hungarian context, Fehérváry (2002) shows how new objects come to represent normality, but the complex processes of international emulation, distinction from socialism, and identification with the presocialist past are reified through 'the discourse of normal'.

The figurational approach advanced here attempts to explain changing connotations of standards of living and luxury through the shifting power relations between social classes over

time, which are largely unplanned and cannot be abstracted to 'discourse'. Though Elias does not deal extensively with the standard of living, he does see it as a necessary condition of civilizing processes. As standards of civilized conduct expand to incorporate new social classes, or new ethnic groups in the case of colonization, there must also be a rise in living standards (Elias 2000: 428–32). Fear of starvation precludes the development of an emotionally even and stable habitus. Greater functional specialization in the context of more secure monopolies of violence and taxation also ensured increased productivity, another necessary condition of rising standards of living (Elias 2000: 429). Growing functional specialization (manifested most clearly in the division of labour) required greater social integration as the fulfilment of each role and task within production and administrative structures and processes required the co-ordination of more and more people of diverse social class backgrounds (as the social figuration became denser and wider). This strengthening of social bonds of interdependence produces a gradual, non-linear and relative equalization between classes, which in turn diffuses the standard of living of upper classes through broader strata as the power balances between classes become less uneven. However, Elias's argument concerning actually rising living standards neglects the social dialogue and contested symbolic representations of consumption moralities (socially accepted and expected consumption practices) as vital processes of the broader movement towards greater social interdependencies. In the rest of this paper I highlight the relevant aspects of the figurational dynamics in Ireland which serve as the explanatory context for the main changes in meanings and moralities concerning standards of living and luxury.

Figurational shifts

Considerable figurational shifts have occurred from the late nineteenth century up to the 1980s that, though non-linear, are intertwined with the emotional and discursive shift in the connotations of standards of living and luxury.This social process has included elements of planning by politicians and senior civil servants, but these plans have been formulated and implemented within the unplanned context of developing social interdependencies over time. Though there is a danger of presenting a 'potted history' in such a condensed format, the intention is not to encapsulate Ireland's narrative in all its detail, but rather to paint in broader strokes the changing nature of relations between various social groups both within Ireland and between the Irish nation-state and other state-societies.

All starting points are inevitably arbitrary and the search for the absolute origin to long-term developments is always fruitless (Elias 1983: 232), but the nation-state formation process and its antecedent social processes are particularly compelling in terms of the prioritization of decent standards of living and the moral rejection of luxury in the early twentieth century. The nineteenth century in Ireland saw a period of increasing social interdependency between Irish farmers and English consumers, which followed the Union of Great Britain and Ireland in 1801 (see Lee 1989; Ó Gráda 1994). Growing agricultural commercialization in Ireland facilitated

increasing industrialization in Britain and vice versa. The second half of the nineteenth century in particular saw agrarian class restructuring such that agricultural labourers declined from 56 to 38 per cent of the male agricultural labour force between 1841 and 1881, while the average size of farm holdings doubled (Clark 1978). These statistics demonstrate the increasing commercialization and mechanization of farming, but also point to emerging, clearer social cleavages between tenant farmers and landlords. This had unforeseen consequences, culminating in decivilizing aspects within Ireland as part of the broader figurational dynamic of increasing interdependencies between Ireland and Britain. Previously, the class structure was complicated by the presence of larger tenant farmers who also sublet land to smaller farmers and labourer-landholders. A farmer could effectively be both landlord and tenant in the link of interdependencies connecting landowner to landless labourer. This restructuring took place in the context of the functional specialization of Ireland and Britain as territorial spaces within the same state formation. But increasing social interdependencies between larger Irish farmers and English middle-class consumers (represented by increasingly powerful middle-class politicians at the expense of the established nobility and gentry groups) meant a relative decline in power chances for the old Anglo- Irish Protestant gentry who legally owned most of the land. The class restructuring also coincided more sharply with other forms of social identification, namely religious and ethnic allegiance.

Some Protestant landlords aligned themselves with the interests of the developing middle ranks of the farming population, and these were joined by an emerging romanticized Anglo-Irish literary group who eschewed the materialism and imagined inauthentic displays of the established nobility groups in England. All these groups formed an unstable alliance of sorts espousing the distinction of Ireland (as a rising we-group) against the leisure class of British-inclined Anglo-Irish landlords. The desire for independence was partly fostered by the Gaelic revival of the late nineteenth century which romanticized Ireland's rural authenticity against the imagined spiritless urban world of England. For example, Yeats (cited in Ashley 2001: 5), the Protestant Anglo- Irish poet, wrote in 1898: 'Because we have come to associate the ancient beliefs about nature with "savage customs" and with books written by men of science, we have almost forgotten that they are still worth dreaming about and talking about.'

The anti-scientific nature of much literary interpretations of Irishness also coincided with both an anti-materialist (in the economic sense) and anti-civilization stance. Synge (cited in Ashley 2001: 12), another Anglo-Irish writer, wrote also in 1898 of his concern that one of Ireland's islands off the west coast was heading toward 'progress'; 'How much of Ireland was formerly like this and how much of Ireland is today Anglicized and civilized and brutalized?' The social distance between the literary Anglo-Irish (and mainly Protestant) middle class of Ireland and the noble circles of England coupled with a growing romanticization of 'authentic' culture led to a renunciation of the refined manners of civilized conduct among this class, as well as the development of a symbolic association of Anglicization, materialism and civilization, which acquired a meaning similar to that held by the intellectual middle class of Germany (Elias 2000: 5–30), who distinguished between *Zivilisation* and *Kultur*. By the end of the nineteenth

century the Anglo-Irish nobility and gentry had undergone significant decline. The literary class fragment moved, in imaginative and symbolic terms, closer to the small farmer and agricultural labourer classes through the romanticization of 'authentic' rural life, and an associated eschewal of the superfluous (luxurious) consuming styles of the metropolitan elite. Inner truth and imagination were favoured as a cultural ideal over explicit social display of wealth, status and privilege. This literary group occupied a position in between the established gentry and the rising farming classes.

The social distance between the established landed gentry on one hand, and the farming and working classes on the other, led to ambivalent attitudes to consumption, particularly of luxury products. The display of refined manners and tastes was denigrated as a display of social superiority. At the same time, landlords were presented as a leisure class who were not entitled to the fruits of the land, which rightfully belonged to those engaged in physical labour. Thus, there was a tension between feelings of repugnance and entitlement. Of course some of the middle classes aspired to social association with the nobility and gentry, as a means of attaining status rather than as a practice of emulation, but with the disintegration of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland after partial Irish 'independence' in 1922, this position became more difficult to maintain. The struggle for national 'independence', incomplete as that project was, elevated the 'small farmer' in whose name the liberation was achieved. This ideal-type in cultural terms served in direct contradistinction to the imagined leisure classes (and their cultural association with luxury) of British and Anglo-Irish nobility and gentry.

The increasing commercialization of farming encouraged the expansion of towns and cities as trade grew. The mechanization of farming also led to migration to towns and other countries, primarily America. From the 1950s in particular the increasing urbanization of Ireland is reflected in the decline of the agricultural labour force; the proportion of the labour force working in agricultural occupations declined from 51 to 16 per cent between 1926 and 1981 (*Census of Population*). From 1901 to 1971 the proportion of people living in towns of more than 1,500 people rose from 32 to 52 per cent (Vaughan and Fitzpatrick 1978).This represents an advance in the density and length of social interdependencies between Irish people, but initially this produced more explicit class struggle, sometimes violent in nature. The early part of the twentieth century saw the emergence of the Irish Trade Union Congress as a federal body (Keogh 1982). The co-operation of unions eventually led to increased co-operation among employers to meet the threat (see McGuire 1992); both groups were caught in a dynamic double-bind compelling them to act in concert to protect their distinct but increasingly inseparable interests. This process of 'amalgamation and federation of employers' and workers' organizations … is an example of a figuration in which opponents compel one another to evolve to higher levels of integration' (De Swaan 1988: 175). As unions sought broader membership to survive in the competitive figuration of many trade unions (see Roche 1992), a stronger sense of affiliation and identification occurred across occupational groups. An increasing functional specialization of industrial relations professionals on both employer and employee sides tended

to rationalize the highly emotive tone of class relations. Relative class equalization is also demonstrated by the attainment of a 40-hour week by the 1970s (Whelan 1998: 115).

However, limited employment opportunities up to the 1950s meant continuing emigration, with England becoming the main destination of emigrants. America had been the main destination prior to the 1920s before immigration controls tightened there. Emigration to the USA amounted to over 12,000 people in 1920 compared to only 469 to England (Vaughan and Fitzpatrick 1978: 265–6).On average, 40,000 people emigrated every year during the 1950s, the overwhelming majority going to England. Of those born between 1936 and 1941, only 59 per cent had stayed in Ireland by 1961 (Rottman and O'Connell 1982: 69). As the former colonizing power, England functioned as a they-group with corresponding feelings of antipathy. The loss of so many young people to that particular group represented a source of considerable shame for political specialists determined to make Ireland 'a nation among nations'. This was especially the case from the 1950s when relative class equalization, in the context of growing social interdependencies, produced stronger feelings among politicians and civil servants of a duty of care to all social classes. This increasing concern to generate employment led ultimately to the abandonment of protectionist economic policies, and the more planned promotion of Ireland as a manufacturing site for foreign industrialists (O'Malley 1992). Ireland's dependence on Britain declined both economically as a destination for exports (see Kennedy, Giblin and McHugh 1988: 183) and politically through accession to the EEC in 1973.

Classifications of necessity and decency

In 1923 Denis Gorey of the Farmer's Party stated:

> A decent standard of living must be provided for the people who have been all their lives in the West of Ireland … A stranger coming into the country would be astonished how human beings could live under such conditions.[2]

Here decency meant the alleviation of extreme poverty within the new context of claiming nation-state status. While the urge to be 'independent' from Britain had not been merely economic, new politicians felt there should be a minimum standard of living that would not invoke shame in the face of foreign social scrutiny. However, national comparisons and fears of shameful revelations had limited potential to democratize living standards as long as class relations remained antagonistic and consumption was culturally stratified accordingly. Class relations produced divergent views of the relationship between standard of living and luxury. The following politician, a company director, responded to a Labour deputy who had condemned the rate of profit of one of Dublin's leading manufacturers and employers, Guinness Brewery:

> They come out of the wage earners' pockets and out of the farmers' pockets, … but more
> particularly out of the workers' pockets … I remember some years ago, when I came to
> Dublin from the country, there were two or three theatres here. There were a couple of
> small music halls, and that represented practically the total number of houses of
> entertainment in the city of Dublin. I do not think that it is an exaggeration to say that at
> the present moment, within a radius of four miles of where we sit, there are probably
> three-quarters of a million of money invested in picture houses alone … they [wage
> earners] were supporting a standard of luxury and not a standard of living … I think it
> ought to be perfectly clear that this country cannot sustain a standard of luxury of that
> nature.[3]

This demonstrates the assumed opposition between standards of luxury and living. Labour
politicians typically insisted on the right to consumption experiences that went beyond mere
physiological needs, but within limits; they were not demanding immediate access to luxury. It
was common for them to refer to workers' wages, to deduct rent and then ask opposing
politicians how a man could rear his family on the remainder. Clearly consumption standards
could be used in class struggles at the parliamentary level. By seeking to typify and generalize
the consumption habits of the working population based on selected aspects of material culture
and architecture, employers could rhetorically resist labour demands for higher wages to meet
the cost of living. Labour politicians could claim that as Irish people, and therefore members of
the same we-group (though comprised of class subgroups), workers had some entitlement to
consume beyond the requirements of physiological subsistence.

Egan went on to question the rise in 'forms of amusement' including the practice of
workers betting on horses in bookmakers throughout the country. In a later debate, Nagle
(Labour) claimed the right to consume beyond basic necessity:

> We are driving down … to the Coolie level … Deputy Egan, in talking about the standard
> of luxury, as differentiated from the standard of living, said, or suggested, that the
> workers should never attend picture houses, that they should not have a flutter on the
> 'gee-gees,' that they should never attend a coursing meeting, and that they should not
> drink any of Guinness's porter.[4]

Consumption norms and values relate to the power ratio both between different classes and
between national groups. The lack of interdependency between working classes of different
ethnic affiliation limits the development of sympathy and concern. Irish workers were keen to
maintain their social distance from a level of consumption that would further relegate their
status. Working-class politicians could also rhetorically rely on the common standard of
decent consumption in an effort to shame middle-class politicians who advocated working-class
restraint in their practices. For working-class representatives, consuming beyond 'necessaries'

was justified in terms of fair compensation for work, and also in terms of the benefits to the nation as a whole:

> Fancy, it has been suggested, the idea of baths for workers! We are told that the worker is not entitled to have cleanliness, and that he should get no facilities, seemingly, for any luxury. … The worker, it is suggested, must not be allowed a bathroom. … if bathrooms were provided and if general cleanliness prevailed, it would be much better in the interests of the nation as a whole. Cleanliness in the worker's home tends to give him heart; to see his home clean and tidy, and his children neat and clean, encourages him to do better.[5]

Here the demand for 'luxury' represents a low standard of expectation, and the deputy was deliberately playing on the audacity of the working classes to want to be clean. But the initial sarcastic tone soon gave way to a serious argument connecting a decent standard of living with national interest and pride, similar to Gorey's concerns above. The labour politician spoke according to the shared understanding of the separation of standards of living and luxury. For him cleanliness was not a luxury and it was important to position it within standards of living as an entitlement claim. Urban social settings often involve denser networks of social interdependence (figurations) compared to rural or agricultural settings, and in situations where the upper and working classes were spatially co-present, higher standards of cleanliness could be expected. For example, union representatives of shopping assistants (by no means the lowest in the social ranking) publicized this physical closeness (even if the social distance remained), in order to improve living conditions over shops, where regular bathing had been impossible (Keogh 1982: 70). Increasing social interdependencies between classes, and the knowledge and promotion of those interdependencies, constitutes the conditions for relative equalization of living standards. This mobilization of knowledge in turn depends upon the development of stronger we-feelings of class solidarity and destiny in order to challenge formerly oppressive social relations.

But this relative equalization is a gradual and uneven process; limited interdependencies with the poorest sections of the population meant the scope of identification and concern was also limited. Upper- and middle-class politicians asserted a very minimal duty of care towards their poorer constituents during the 1920s; Patrick McGilligan,[6] Minister for Industry and Commerce, stated, in response to claims of starvation in Dublin, that people 'may have to die in this country and may have to die through starvation'. He was certainly not advocating this possibility, but the comment nevertheless indicates an acceptable, if regrettable, low standard of living for some, itself signifying minimal caring between classes (though there was some ambivalence and ambiguity here as 'the small man' was often idealized as part of the project of the emancipated nation). Similarly, Sir John Keane asserted that the 'State does not accept responsibility for every one of its citizens except the obligation to keep them from starvation'.[7] The notion of a limited national standard of consumption into the 1930s is supported by James

Dillon's belief in 'a decent standard of living for our people' within the context of government based on 'Catholic philosophy' which

> secures for the community as a whole the highest standard of living and the happiest conditions that can be secured under any human dispensation. It carries with it at the same time that quality of conservatism which prevents a nation running riot and squandering on futile and visionary pursuits and fads the resources which should be available for the sick and destitute.[8]

The opposition between luxury and standard of living, and the respective class connotations, remained common after the Emergency (WWII):

> . . . our Government has paid more attention to catering for the idle rich, who have been living in luxury and probably will continue to live in luxury, assisted by the Government, instead of trying to improve the standard of living and the conditions under which the unfortunate masses of the people have been compelled to live … the majority of our able-bodied workers are compelled to emigrate and that Ireland is no longer a fit country for those young people to work in so that they may earn a livelihood. They are denied the right to work to obtain a decent wage and a decent standard of living whereby they can marry and rear their families in Christian decency.[9]

This 'idle rich' class designation of luxury was presented as morally repugnant in the context of the 'working' classes being forced to leave their community due to the inability to meet the social expectations, for men, to marry and provide materially for wives and children. The government's inability to provide such meaningful social functions for upcoming generations was also a source of considerable shame for politicians attempting to build the nation.

Democratization of luxury

By the 1960s the strict opposition between standard of living and luxury began to recede as new luxury commodities were presented as more democratically accessible. In 1960, McGuire noted the rapid increase in living standards:

> Television has come at a time when the standard of living is rapidly increasing and when this luxury is available not only to wealthy people but to people of average means. In the past we always associated the idea of luxuries with wealthy people but nowadays wealth is spread to a greater extent over the community and television can be availed of by almost every section.[10]

McGuire had been a senator since 1948 and was also chairman and managing director of Brown Thomas, a prestigious retail department store, as well as being a director of National Bank Limited and General President of the Federated Union of Employers (see McGuire 1992). He was a prominent representative of the employing class in Ireland. By this stage the standard of living was undergoing a significant shift in meaning, but television was identified as a luxury and access to this luxury was not deliberately constituted as an element in the standard of living. However, the broad diffusion of television across classes alters the meaning of luxury and class. Material goods are less susceptible to social mapping and consequently class distinctions diminish in material signification.

Rising power chances of the working classes shaped parliamentary discourse on access to new commodities. In 1963 Brendan Corish, leader of the Labour Party, expressed residual class tensions over access to luxuries:

> It seems to me that in recent times there is a certain amount of concern expressed by sections of the community as to the standard of living of ordinary working people … We hear people talking about the working class, especially the manual workers, in terms of how well off they are now and pointing to the forest of television aerials in the new housing areas in various towns and cities as if it were wrong that people should have radios …[11]

This working-class defiance in the face of middle-class resentment echoes earlier Labour statements on worker entitlements, but by now the power balance between these interdependent groups had become less unequal. The relative democratization of luxury is a reflection of this social process. The 'standard of living' as a rhetorical concept expands to incorporate former luxuries; television was now positioned as part of the standard of living. In the same debate, Jack Lynch, Minister for Industry and Commerce, asserted that it 'is only natural that … we should aspire to the standard of living enjoyed in [Britain and America]'.[12] The desire for international social parity developed in contrast to the pride in continued distinction through different material cultures, which still persisted among some older politicians. The dominant parliamentary discourse, however, showed delight in the increasing standard of living, which incorporated commodities previously designated as luxuries:

> It is a very good barometer of the general standard of living when one finds ordinary people able to invest in motor cars, television sets, refrigerators, electric sewing machines and so on. We are not criticising people for having these things; we are delighted to see them have them …[13]

The fact that the deputy stressed the lack of criticism at these material developments demonstrates that this period was one of significant and accelerated change. Sometimes politicians referred to workers' right to 'semi-luxury',[14] which expresses the slightly restrained

ambivalence to these changes. The desire for parity of standards was also articulated as a means toward national reunification,[15] and emulation; 'We aspire to the same standard of life as the people of Europe and the same standard of behaviour. We have the same ambitions … We want to keep abreast of them.'[16] The former cultural imperative of maintaining and expressing national difference was by now becoming increasingly peripheral.

By 1973 Brian Lenihan was able to dismiss the centrality of food as the main constituent of an Irish standard of living: 'The notion that we are a primitive economy and that food is the only item in the expenditure of people is a crude, political, primitive notion that … does not represent reality.'[17] Access to, and use of, a broad range of commodities were by now, according to the senator, 'essential factors in people's way of life'. Improving standards of living was now more explicitly understood as enabling access to a broad range of commodities and consumption experiences, and was positioned as the 'basic object of all governmental activity', while 'the appetite is limitless in regard to consumption under the non-food categories'.

Conclusion

Though the movement for national self-determination was led primarily by middle-class groups, many prominent individuals had strong social and cultural links with the small farmer class. Urban workers also began to see commodities of foreign origin as a threat to their interests and social survival. Lengthening interdependencies between British and Irish people over the course of the nineteenth century through political unification, state formation, industrialization and agricultural commercialization heightened the animosities of lower- and middle-class Irish groups towards British elites, who were characterized as indulging in luxury from the produce of Irish labour. Ironically, the growing interdependencies improved the power chances of these Irish groups in relation to established Anglo-Irish elites in Ireland, but continuing class, ethnic and religious distinctions prohibited mutual identification. As a cultural principle, luxury was emotionally and morally associated with they-groups in contradistinction to the emerging national we-image. However, evidence suggests that that this national ideal of limited consumption contradicted continuing inequalities between social classes in Ireland over access to material goods and consumption experiences. Cultural antipathy towards England also contradicted continued economic dependence on English consumers as a destination for Irish agricultural produce.

National distinctions were complicated by some peripheral members of the Anglo-Irish Protestant gentry who experienced the disjuncture between the civilized code of conduct prevalent in elite circles in London and the less mannered and refined codes in rural Ireland, and found the latter more 'real' and 'authentic'. This was a reflection of the lesser status accorded minor gentry families living in Ireland, particularly if they had financial problems in maintaining membership of the London-based social elites, and the literary and artistic pursuits of some within this group corresponding to the experience of socially induced self-restraints and

the belief in a less artificially cultivated 'inner core'. Thus, their anti-materialist ethic and fantasies of rural idylls sprang from a different, but related, experience of the broad social figuration connecting Irish and English groups. While this class fragment would have difficulty limiting their consumption to the living standards of the small farming and labouring classes, they felt both excluded and repelled by the 'false' civilization of luxury and ceremony of British elites.

Growing industrialization and urbanization since national 'independence', partly spurred by continuing agricultural commercialization, consolidation and mechanization, increased social interdependencies within towns and cities. Class relations became less unequal and less emotionally volatile (without becoming entirely harmonious) through the growth and centralization of employee and employer institutions. However, the pace of industrialization could not meet the demand for meaningful social opportunities amongst younger generations. Though emigration had been a source of collective shame as well as a rhetorical device for insults between politicians, this emotional disposition became more acute as Britain became not only the primary destination for exports, but also for people unable to secure employment and therefore some measure of social status within the nation-state. By the 1950s, growing social interdependencies between classes in Ireland gave rise to an abandonment of projects of explicit national distinction, as an idealized and fateful compulsion, towards a more realistic international accommodation. This widening scope of social identification and the growing restraint on displays of national superiority are reflected in changes in feelings associated with the symbols and social practices deemed to be of they-groups. Luxury as a term of denigration begins to lose its highly negative emotional connotation. The class connotation of certain consumer objects also reduces as the social integration and proximity of the different classes proceed. As the scope of identification undergoes a process of internationalization, models formerly derided as foreign become more amenable. As people locked into longer and broader interdependent links must be able to communicate and understand one another for reasonably effective social integration to proceed, a relative social standardization of conduct develops, but within limits as older we-group allegiances do not disappear; they may even intensify temporarily. The symbols of older we-group formations acquire a melancholic, nostalgic quality in the face of new, less nation-specific consumer objects and symbols. Where figurational shifts are less intense, such as peripheries of the figuration or among the older generation, the new objects and symbols of they-groups may become the object of derision. However, gradually the adoption of more internationalized tastes and consumer practices becomes socially acceptable and even encouraged as people feel the need to know more about events and processes occurring beyond their immediate social circle and national we-group as their fate becomes enmeshed in broader figurations. These processes of increasing interdependency between nation-states restructure relations at lower levels of social integration; the growth of new employment opportunities meant that the younger generation became less dependent on the older generation for such opportunities. The older codes of conduct and standards of living appeared less crucial to the new social structure.

Crucially, and *pace* the explicit and implicit arguments of key sociologists of consumption such as Baudrillard and to a lesser extent Bourdieu, these intertwined social processes have not followed a planned trajectory according to the interests and strategies of one powerful group alone. Ideals and standards (in this case, related to consumption) change due to contradictory elements of the broad figurational dynamic. Double-bind dynamics of group formation and consolidation for employers and employees produce stronger class interdependencies and less asymmetric power relations. This heightens the collective shame of we-group dissolution through emigration, a shame that intensifies as dependence on the former colonizing they-group to provide employment increases. The national distinction of decent but limited consumption gives way to aspirations of international standards as we-group survival as a nation-state depends on a global network, both politically and economically. This globalization process means the nation's living standards become more susceptible to a myriad of obscure decisions and actions far beyond the control of national politicians. This spiralling social complexity and opacity means that although ideals of living standards may continue to rise, actual standards can fall.

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Notes

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2. *Dáil Debates (DD)*, volume 3 column 1159, 28 May 1923.

3. Deputy P.J. Egan, *DD*, volume 5column 652–3, 2 November 1923.

4. Deputy Nagle, *DD*, volume 5 column 833, 15 November 1923.

5. Deputy Lyons, *DD*, volume 6 column 648, 25 January, 1924.

6. *DD*, volume 9 column 562, 30 October 1924.

7. *Seanad Debates (SD)*, volume 6 column 53, 10 December 1925.

8. *DD*, volume 62 column 2534, 17 June 1936.

9. Deputy O.J. Flanagan,*DD*, volume 108 column 549, 16 October 1947.

10. Senator McGuire, *SD*, volume 52 column 116, 21 January 1960.

11. *DD*, volume 200 column 93, 20 February 1963.

12. column 136.

13. Deputy Booth, *DD*, volume 214 column 798–9, 18 February 1965.

14. Deputy Belton, *DD*, volume 231 column 1121, 30 November 1967.

15. Deputy Nolan, *DD*, volume 259 column 2182, 22 March 1972.

16. Deputy Donegan, column 2184.

17. Senator Lenihan, *SD*, volume 75 column 943–6, 2 August 1973.

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